

Testing Times - Day 5

‘Look, I’ll think about it, right. I can’t say right now’, said Michael, half whispering to Freddy. He was clearly embarrassed and uncomfortably with all the attention.

‘No, that’s not fair, you’re going to have to make a decision. You’ve got people depending on you’, implored Freddy.

‘I can’t say, I just can’t say’, Michael was almost sobbing. He turned away.

Freddy and Michael had been talking for almost half an hour before the quarter-final against the team from Spain. Michael had spent the rest of the day talking to the people from Barcelona who had been tracking and watching him for weeks. It really seemed as if this was the end for the team, with its best player about to move on.

The announcer crackled into life once more.

OK, the fourth quarter final between Lancaster Road and FC Barcelona Lions will take place in two minutes on pitch A4

There was a frantic scurrying around amongst the parents and coaches of Lancaster Road.

‘What did they say?’ said a bemused Mr Andrews.

‘It’s on A4’.

‘I don’t care how you got here, where are we playing?’

‘We’re playing on pitch A4’, explained Jaz carefully, ‘and if you look at the map, we turn left here, over the rickety bridge, down the leafy lane, through the hedge backwards, then over the ford in the river, and we’ll be there’.

‘Through a river, I’m not getting my feet wet!’ yelled Clara.

‘Come on, let’s just go, we’ve got a match to play!’ said Freddy, pulling the team around him. Especially Michael.

They turned right, up the leafy lane, pushed their way through the hedge forwards, crawled under the bridge, and strolled over the dried-up river. As they arrived at the ‘M’ pitches, it was clear the opposition was ready for them.

The opposition team were resplendent in the blue and maroon stripes of Barcelona.

On the sidelines was a coaching staff of about twenty people. Three players were getting treatment for injuries sustained earlier in the tournament. One was getting last-minute instructions from the Head Coach. Another was lying on a makeshift couch, his eyes firmly shut, as the team psychologist

encouraged him to visualise scoring the winning goal. A serene smile played on his lips.

Two of the players were receiving attention to their hair. They both had long black hair, and both of them had little hairbands to stop the hair flying around in the wind. As one of the coaches (the Hair Coach?) was attending to him, one of these players kept a ball bouncing around at his feet, bouncing once on his heels, twice on his toes, onto his thigh. And all the time, a toothy grin played on his lips.

The Lancaster Road players flung their assorted bits of kit onto the ground at the opposite side of the pitch.

As the Barcelona players formed a huddle on the far side, surrounded by their management team (dressed in matching tracksuits with the the famous mes que un club legend on the back).

‘It’s OK, it says they’re a mess of a club!’ said Wil, laughing nervously as the opposition stretched in unison.

‘More than a club, Bro, it means they are more than a club!’ replied his brother as Mr Andrews led them through their warm-up routine.

‘Thirty seconds, please gentlemen!’ called the referee from the centre spot.

‘Right you lot, I’ll go and sort out the kick-off’, said the coach, and tottered off to introduce himself to the opposition.

There was much handshaking a laughing again, and one of the Barcelona coaches even planted a kiss on each of Mr Andrews’s cheeks. The Lancaster Road coach also pointed across at Michael, nodding his head vigorously, and laughing some more. Freddy took his chance.

‘Look we’ve got twenty-five seconds, you’ve just got to decide...’

‘I don’t have to decide now, why now, come on, tell me that...’ replied Michael.

‘These guys want you to go, look at them!’. There was more pointing, and sage nodding of heads from the Barca team.

‘OK, so look at this, what would you do?’ said Michael, looking around him at the pile of discarded drinks bottles, the assorted kit, deflated footballs, and random litter which represented the Lancaster Road camp.

‘But these people are your friends, we love you, we’ve been playing together for nearly two years, come on...!’

‘I just don’t know, I just don’t. Sorry’. Michael again looked close to tears.

There was a loud blast from the referee’s whistle.

‘I tell you what’, he said at last, ‘if I can score against this lot, then that’s it’.

‘That’s what?’ said Freddy, his eyes narrowing.

‘If I can score against Barcelona, I’m staying with Lancaster Road!’

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