

Testing Times - Day 1

Believe it or not, Jimi was still at it one week later. As the sun soaked them in glorious June warmth, Jimi, his sleeves rolled up, his face a picture of concentration, sang, 'I'm singing, in the rain, Just, singing, in the rain... What a glorious feeling... I'm happy...again!' 'I'm glad he is', remarked Wil, as he tied his laces, 'last week was terrible!' 'Yes, but he's found his place now,' replied his brother, 'official team mascot, singer, guitarist, songwriter, and motivator!' 'Well, he doesn't motivate me!' said Clara. 'He's good fun to have around, though, isn't he?' 'I suppose so', replied Clara grudgingly. As they trained in the warm sunshine, preparing for the weekend's tournament, again the two strange figures were standing in the distance looking on. Just staring really. Except when Michael had the ball. Then they became animated, talking quickly to each other, heads inclined, clipboards at the ready. Busy scribbling. Their scribbling seemed to intensify the more Michael played. If Michael did a couple of stepovers, they scribbled something on their clipboards. If Michael did some keepy-uppies, they scribbled some more. When Michael did one of those things where you keep the ball up, circle your foot around the ball, and then keep it up again before the ball drops, they scribbled so fast it was as if smoke was rising from their pens. Finally Mr Andrews had had enough. 'I've had enough!' he croaked. 'Get yourselves a drink, I'm going to talk to them!' He took a swig from his own flask, coughed twice, and tottered over to the far touchline. 'Who are they anyway?' said Clara. 'They look like they're from another club', replied Wil. 'They look like they're from another planet!' said Hardy.

'Certainly another country', Freddy muttered, 'and they seem to be interested in Michael'. 'What do you mean, interested?' said Clara. 'Well, look, every time Michael gets the ball, they write something down and start chattering away in a foreign language. Did you see when he scored the penalty? They were hopping up and down, laughing, almost singing...anyway, Mr Andrews will sort them out!' In the distance, Mr Andrews was sorting them out. He had marched over to them at a fine pace (for him), and started off by wagging his finger at them. Then he had pointed his finger right at them. Then he had sort of jabbed his finger into one of their faces. And then the other one. After that, he had put his hands by his sides. He had then inclined his head to one side, as if listening carefully. Then he had started nodding his head. Freddy looked over again. Mr Andrews was now nodding his head vigorously up and down, and...what was that...he was actually smiling at the two men, who were laughing back at him. Mr Azalea laughed too, then grabbing each of their hands in turn, shook hands with them warmly. One of the men then handed him a pen, and he appeared to sign something quickly on a piece of paper. Freddy actually saw him look over guiltily at the team before writing. What was going on? Who were these guys? Why was Mr Andrews so pleased with himself? Mr Andrews staggered back across the pitch. 'Amazing...amazing!' he said, smiling and shaking his head, as if in disbelief, before adding...'quite irregular of course...very irregular...oh yes...yes...we won't be seeing them again!' The two men continued standing beside the pitch. Clipboards poised. One of them bent down and pulled two small packages out of the bag at his feet. ***** Training came to a close with Michael doing one of those backheel thingies, where he flipped it up high with his heel and the ball came down in front of him, from where he crossed the ball in a high arc towards the penalty spot. Flying in from the edge of the area, Clara of all people was there to power in a diving header into the top corner.

Frantic scribbling from the men who were supposed to have gone. Wreckless writing from the swarthy strangers. Desperate drawing from the dudes who should have disappeared. And devious jotting down from the fearsome foreigners. 'Hey, Michael, can we talk to you a minute, please?' Michael looked shocked at the call from across the pitch. He turned away. 'We do NOT talk to strangers! Go away!' yelled Clara, stepping two paces towards the strangers. 'She's right! Go away!' added Hardy, stepping two paces back. 'It's OK,' said Mr Andrews, 'I'll deal with this, you stay here'. Mr Andrews walked across and met the two men mid-pitch. There was more hand-shaking, and laughing, and nodding of heads. The two packages were handed over. A final handshake. Mr Andrews returned to the Lancaster

Road team. He handed one of the packages to Michael. *****

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