

Illness Strikes - Day 4

Hardy really did seem bad.

OK, so it was wet. Actually it was very wet.

But that didn't mean Hardy had to look like a balloon.

Remember he was ill? Coughing and spluttering?

But that didn't mean he had to dress up like a polar explorer?

He shouldn't have played. Not in the rain.

But he did play.

Actually he played quite well.

But he didn't have to resemble a deep-sea diver.

First he had on a vest, which he wouldn't have chosen but which his mother had insisted he should wear if (in her words) '*you're going out to play that silly game in this weather*'. So he wore the vest. On top of that he had two t-shirts, the first white, and the second pink, given to him for his birthday (as a joke) by Clara. On top of the two t-shirts he wore a dark green hooded top, with the hood up, even though it actually was not raining when the match against Hurst started. Was that it?

Of course not. On top of the hooded top, he wore a puffy ski jacket, one of those ones that is basically a duvet with arms. But that was not all.

Desperate to preserve the look of the team, he had put on his Lancaster Road goalie jersey on top of the jacket. Although the jersey had been bought specially for him and was normally the right size, on top of all this it looked small. In fact, the arms of the puffy jacket ballooned out from under the shirt like Popeye's, and his tummy looked like it was expecting twins.

Of course he didn't stop there. Ill as he was, he needed all the warmth he could get, so his head was wrapped in a furry bobble hat, and he wore a pair of woollen gloves under the goalkeepers' gloves. When you add in the long-johns he wore under the tracksuit trousers, you can imagine the sight that met the opposition.

A monster in goal! A Michelin Man! A sad and sorry blob of humanity. As Hardy waddled on to the pitch, there was instant giggling amongst both the home and away supporters.

'Look, I'm ill, right', said Hardy miserably to the group of onlookers. He took up his position in goal.

Unlike the first game, this match against the Rovers went according to plan, with the now-well-organised Kidz midfield dominating from start to finish. Hardy hardly touched the ball, and certainly

did not have to bounce to either side for any of the stops he did make.

During the first half, Michael scored two goals, the first following tenacious work by Jaz in midfield, the second a solo effort finishing up with a left foot shot. Even the Hurst players and supporters applauded that one.

Except one.

After the first goal, one of the supporters had muttered something to himself, and then flung his hat to the ground. It had landed in a pool of muddy rainwater.

After the second goal, even though it was a great effort, he had shouted something at one of his players, and then ripped off his scarf before throwing that to the ground as well.

Half way through the second half, Freddy was at the back, watching the game going on in front of him, relaxed, happy to be two-nil up.

Then Skip, the most dangerous Hurst attacker, beat Clara on the left, beat Wil on the right, and started coming towards him with the ball. A dangerous player.

Just take it easy. I'm the last man. But I can stop him. I must time this right. Let him come, let him come...now in. Right foot to the ball, keep the studs down, take it on the bootlaces, a little slide, that's it...!

There was a murmur of appreciation from the parents and friends as Freddy picked himself up from the tackle, the ball at his feet, and strode forward with it. He had timed the tackle perfectly, and was now on half way, with some space to move in. He strode forward again, looking up for someone to pass to.

Michael, out on the left wing, was the obvious candidate. But Hurst had done their homework. Having suffered at the feet of Michael in the first half, they had got him man-marked this time, and there was very little room for the pass.

On the other side was Alex, but his path was blocked by two defenders.

As Freddy looked up, the space in front of him just seemed to get wider. He moved forward to the mid-way point in the Hurst half. He looked up. Goalkeeper looked nervous. In fact she had looked cold and nervous from the start of the game.

Freddy had one last look.

Well, there's no harm in having a pop from here. Now, think about it, what do we practice in training?

Freddy seemed to have all the time in the world to think through what he was going to do.

Draw back the right foot, now swing through straight and slightly across the ball, make the contact with the front of your foot just to the left of centre, keep your eye on the ball, and CONTACT!

GOAL! yelled the crowd as Freddy saw the ball start out to the left then swerve round from left to right

and fly unerringly into the top corner of the Hurst net. The goalkeeper made her best attempt at a save yet, but still got nowhere near the ball.

Freddy just stood. His team-mates leapt on to him from all angles.

On the sidelines, the Hurst supporter, who was wearing a shirt in the colours of the team, started to take it off, with a *I'm going to fling this shirt in the mud* kind of look on his face. He was now shouting wildly at anyone who would listen – his team, his fellow supporters, the referee, the Kidz supporters. Mr Andrews walked over calmly.

'May I ask what the problem is?'

'Well can't you see, they're not fit to wear the shirt. No passion, no passing, no commitment, NO CLUE!'

He got the shirt three-quarters off, revealing a belly that looked like it was expecting triplets.

'Put it back on, sir, and listen to me', Mr Andrews was firm and the man had to listen.

'These children are nine years old. Just look at them.' The Hurst players had just mounted a decent attack, but Skip had shot very very high over the bar, before flopping head first into a huge muddy puddle in the goalmouth. Players from both sides were laughing hysterically as the referee blew his whistle to bring the match to a close.

'What you see there, sir', continued the Lancaster Road coach, *'is fourteen children out in the fresh air, playing a beautiful game, playing to the best of their ability, smiling, laughing, and having fun. And that, sir, is what the game is all about. If you cannot accept that, you should not turn up in future.'*

There was a spontaneous outbreak of applause as Mr Andrews finished his speech.

Except from Hardy.

He just coughed.