

Cold, Wet, and Happy – Day 1

'Yo Yo! Pass! Now!'

Hardy screamed at the top of his voice as he surged through from defence into the midfield, waiting for the pass from Alex.

It didn't come. Instead Alex fed the ball upfield to Wil, whose mazy run past two defenders took him close to the left corner flag. Could he get the ball across, as another defender came out to meet him?

The crowd went quiet for a moment. The ball would surely go out for a goal kick?

But Wil had other ideas. He managed to turn the defender, using his own '*inside-out*' turn, which he had practiced endlessly in the garden. He called it '*inside-out*' because it involved him pretending to go outside the player (towards the touchline), and then instead turning inside and heading towards goal. As he executed the move, it occurred to him that it should be called the '*outside-in*' turn...

But no matter, he was free, six metres out. He looked up, and saw their keeper advancing towards him.

Could he slip it under the keeper? Could he blast it at the near post? Could he chip it? He looked up again.

Hardy had carried on steaming down the pitch and was now close to the penalty area.

But Alex was better placed. On the far side of the area, close to goal. And he was more likely to score. But could he pick him out?

A brilliant pass. A brilliant, brilliant, brilliant pass. Brilliant it was. Not just good. Brilliant. The ball slipped brilliantly between two players into the open space where Alex stood. With the goalkeeper floundering close to Wil, all Alex had to do was tap it home. Which he did.

'Brilliant!' screamed Hardy, jumping on Alex.

'Yes...' said Alex slowly, ruffling his hand through his long blonde hair, fully aware of the beauty of the moment.

Their opponents were a mid-table team from Derby Road, which was the street next to theirs. Interestingly (*or perhaps not*), the team itself was also called Derby Road. They also trained at the field at the top of the hill, and occasionally they had met up there and had a joint kick-around. Very interestingly (*or almost certainly not*), the match was a local derby which, as Jaz had explained, was a match between two teams who lived very close to each other.

Interestingly (*yes...this IS interesting!*) at half-time, the score was one-all.

During the second half, Mr Andrews, who had been shouting his usual words of encouragement, was busy with a little gaggle of people on the touchline. There seemed to be some kind of discussion going

on, and Freddy saw a tall man remonstrating with a well-dressed woman, who was being led away, clearly against her will. From out of the melee emerged a small figure, instantly recognisable in his hooded training top, jogging up and down urgently.

Michael was back!

Freddy's heart did a little leap, then a small whoop, then started beating so hard that he thought it might pop out through his chest. The ball arrived at his feet from Alex, and without a thought he kicked it straight off the pitch, so that Michael could get on.

Jaz, who had been quiet all game, raised his hand and looked over towards the bench.

'OK, Baz, you come off, lad', said Mr Andrews, whose ability to remember names had not improved despite the weeks he had known them. Mr Andrews gave Jaz his tracksuit, before turning to Michael,

'Now, lad, I want you to play up front, support the midfield, and help out in defence...'

'I know what to do, thanks,' said Michael, in his polite, quiet way. He stripped off his top, and jogged a few metres, then sprinted a few more, before jogging past Freddy to his position up front.

'Happy New Year!' he whispered as he passed.

Although the match had been a good one, and Lancaster Road had not really been in any danger, the score still stood at one-one, and the minutes were ticking away.

A Derby player took the throw-in, down the line. Clara, helping out in defence, clattered into the player and emerged with the ball. In one not-very-graceful movement, she had taken it five metres upfield, and laid it off to Wil who was steaming up on her right.

Wil, again heading straight for goal midway into the Derby half, approached a defender, dropped his shoulder to the left, then drifted right past the defender. He was within sight of the goal, about ten yards out. He could have had a shot, and would almost certainly have scored, but instead he laid the ball off to Michael who was just inside on his left. Michael could have had a shot, and would almost certainly have scored, but instead he chipped it into the air, nodded it over the last defender and volleyed it into the bottom left corner of the net.

They stood in the centre circle congratulating Michael on the goal, and congratulating themselves on the two-one result. A few words from Mr Andrews followed, then a little whine from Wil.

'What's up, lad?' said Mr Andrews, looking down at Wil sympathetically.

'I'm c-c-cold...' shivered Wil.

'M-m-m-me too...' said almost everyone else.

'W-w-w-wimps...!' said Hardy, also shivering.

'You're right, it is a little nippy. Like my old uncle Azalea used to say, 'red sky at night, shepherds warning!' Wrap up warm tonight!'

They looked at Mr Andrews with the usual sense of puzzlement. Was there something deep and meaningful in what he had said? Did he really have an uncle called Azalea? And surely, red sky at night was shepherd's delight?

Freddy clapped his hands together to keep warm and they tramped off to their waiting parents.

But whatever Mr Andrews had meant, it certainly was cold, and the setting sun had turned the horizon a fiery red.
