

New Year Blues – Day 1

'I said RESOLUTION, not revolution...!' said Freddy as Hardy was busy turning cartwheels across the room.

They had spent hours thinking about what their New Year's resolutions should be, but really only Wil had come up with anything meaningful, and several of those were unobtainable, such as,

'I will score in every game this season'

'I will skill the entire opposition before scoring'

'I will never get annoyed at Hardy spinning around...'

'Oi, Hardy, leave it out willya!' he shouted, thus immediately breaking his third resolution.

'No, I like this!' Hardy panted, as he crumpled into a heap in the far corner. As usual, they both laughed at him and with him at the silliness of it all.

But it had been different on Boxing Day. Very different. Maybe it was the wet and windy weather. Maybe they had all had too much turkey and mince pies. Or maybe their heads were sore from the day before. Whatever it was, Freddy had sat down with Wil at the end of the day, head in his hands.

'I don't think we can go on like this, Bro. It's no good'.

On Boxing Day Mr Andrews had organised a friendly match.

Several players had got injured.

One announced his retirement.

One was nearly arrested.

Oh Dear!

It had all started out well enough. At their final match of 2006, the five-three victory over the girls of Hags United, Mr Andrews had suggested a game between the Lancaster Road players and their parents on Boxing Day. He had chosen a venue (the field at the top of their street), and had agreed to provide refreshments for the players and spectators. Everyone had been keen on the idea, and the whole team had turned up at the appointed time of eleven o'clock.

Now, a few things were working against them.

Firstly, the weather. It had rained for three days solid over Christmas, and playing on the field on Boxing Day morning was like running through treacle.

Hardy ran straight onto the pitch and did an extravagant power slide on his knees, skimming at least ten metres and yelling 'Yo!' at the top of his voice.

'*Shut it!*' commanded Hardy's father, who was dressed in rugby kit. He looked pityingly down at his son, who came back and stood muddily by his side, head bowed.

Secondly, the parents.

Most of them had had very late nights the night before, and several of them showed signs of wear and tear even before the match had begun. Hardy's Dad was not the only one with a temper that morning (although he was the only one who appeared to be in a permanent strop).

Freddy and Wil's father also looked a little brittle, although he maintained his customary good humour.

'*Come on then, Mr Andrews, let's get this show on the road!*' He had appointed himself captain of the team (the 'Greens') which included himself and his two sons, Alex and his grandfather (Alex had never properly known his father, who finally had never returned from one of his many trips overseas), and Clara accompanied by her mother.

On the other side (the 'Yellows') was Hardy and his Dad (who was marching up to the centre circle for the kick off), JoJo with her *papa*, Jaz and his Dad, and Michael with his Dad. Mr Andrews took on the refereeing duties.

JoJo's father did not show any signs of a heavy night, although his chin showed the rugged signs of three days without shaving. He wore a complete France kit from the golden years of Michel Platini. He made himself busy encouraging his team to stretch and shimmy, until Hardy's dad stared at him and said,

'*Let's just get on with it, shall we?*'

Monsieur Dupont just shrugged his shoulders and tossed his head back with a slight smile.

The match started with the Greens (wearing green bibs) on the attack. Freddy, playing in midfield, was wearing the magic boots he had been given for Christmas by his Auntie Annie. Magic they weren't, but brilliant they were, a brand new pair of Nike's, in golden yellow, which fitted perfectly. In the heel was Nike's new *tick technology*TM which showed you how fast you were running by ticking louder and faster as you built up speed. As he made his way with the ball down the wing, he sounded like a bomb about to go off.

As he got close to the corner flag ready to cross, Hardy's Dad came over and grabbed him by the shoulder.

'*Hey! Turn that thing off! I've had enough of it.*'

As Mr Andrews blew his whistle to signal a foul.

'*Leave it out, ref, that was no foul!*'

Before Mr Andrews could remonstrate with the offender, Hardy's Dad had kicked the ball away towards the crowd of onlookers, mostly Mums and grandparents, who were on the sidelines, enjoying the warm wine which was provided. Mr Andrews blew again. Hardy's Dad turned his back and trudged off back to the penalty area.

Michael had put away a great goal towards the end of the first half, volleying home a cross from the right by Wil. His Dad had leapt in the air and punched it with delight, although his mother, standing elegantly on the touchline, had stared impassively ahead, arms folded.

But at half time, Michael seemed agitated. He was standing some way from the rest of the players who were enjoying Mr Andrews's half time hospitality, talking earnestly to his mother and father. His Dad had his arm round his shoulder, and they were facing his mother, who was pointing her well-manicured finger (at both Michael and his father), tossing her well-coiffed hair skywards, and wrapping her well-expensive coat ever more tightly around her.

The game ended in a five-nil win for the yellows, mainly because Mr Hardy kept scoring by pushing small children off the ball and firing in from distance. Eventually Mr Andrews had fished around in his pocket and found an old bus ticket, mostly red in colour, and had brandished it angrily at Hardy's Dad.

'You're sending me off? You must be joking...!'

'That is exactly what I am doing, and until you can play or watch the game with a little more respect, off is where you'll stay!'

Freddy and Wil stood close to each other watching this scene unfold before them, nervously and subconsciously moving closer together as they watched. Mr Andrews looked so small as he faced up to his adversary.

Then, from the sidelines, a single clap. Then another. Then, more and more, until the whole crowd of spectators was applauding the referee. Mr Andrews appeared to grow in height as he realised the support he had for his actions. Mr Hardy seemed to shrink down as he realised his position. He picked up the ball and angrily headed off to the car park.

The game over, Michael pulled Freddy to one side in his usual quiet way. He looked this way and that, as if he was frightened by something. He looked towards his mother, who stared back at him as if encouraging him to do something.

Then he handed Freddy a note.

'Sorry', he murmured.
