

Let the Games Begin – Day 2

What on earth were they going to do now?

Mr Andrews scratched his head again, as six concerned faces stared up at him from the huddle they had formed near the centre circle. Michael's family were tending to him on the touchline. The Rovers team were looking quietly confident. Mr Andrews took charge of the situation.

'Erm, er....'

He tried again.

'Well...erm...you've just got to...erm...'

'Come ON, Grandad', said Clara, looking up to her grandparent for a decision.

'It's simple,' said Wil, *'move everyone up. Bring Hardy into defence, move me into midfield, and Alex up front'.*

'And WHO will play in goal?', said Hardy belligerently.

'Eet weel be me!', said JoJo decisively, stepping lightly over the ground to where they were huddled. She adjusted her headband, pulled her gloves on, and marched (or rather, sort of skipped) her way over to the goalmouth. Hardy looked at Freddy, and raised one eyebrow to the sky. Freddy said nothing.

'Excellent, same again this half, you can do it!' said Mr Andrews, regaining a little of his composure.

But they couldn't do it.

Without Michael, the team was not the same.

They tried hard. Alex tried out his full range of tricks to get around the Rovers defence, but the move would always break down in the face of strong defending. Clara pushed and shoved her way through, several times, but could not produce a second goal which would have given them breathing space. And at the other end, the opposition strikers were starting to come alive.

With their captain in inspirational form, they fashioned a goal from a great move down the left touchline which Hardy tried to intercept, but he only succeeded in kicking at thin air as the ball went past him and settled into the bottom corner of JoJo's net.

With a minute to go, the teams were battling it out in midfield, when Skip once again embarked on a mazy run before passing to the smallest player on the pitch who hustled the ball in off a post. JoJo, who nonetheless dived the length of the goalmouth to try to get to the ball, had no chance. She groaned as she cleaned some of the mud off her face...and her hands...and her knees. Hardy gave her a great slap on the back,

'Bad luck, JoJo...nothing you could do about it!'

JoJo managed a weak and enigmatic smile.

The referee blew for full time, and the supporters of both sides cheered for what had been a great game between two evenly-matched teams. Mr Andrews consoled his young charges, saying that they had played a great game, they could have earned a draw, it was only their first game...

Freddy sat close to the sideline, clasp ing his forehead in his muddy hands, contemplating the fact they had lost a match they could, and maybe should, have won. His mind was almost blank, his dream already shattered. He had missed the vital tackle, he had not captained the team properly, he had not...

'Freddy, lad, stand up!' Mr Andrews was surprisingly firm.

'We lost a game. We lost a close game. Everyone played well. What more can I ask? Yes, it would have been great to win, but this is only one battle on a long and complex journey, this is only...'

Sensing another lengthy military story, Freddy smiled weakly and interrupted,

'You're right. We played OK, didn't we? For a start?'

'You most certainly did, Freddy, my lad. And look, things are already looking up!'

They looked down the touchline, where Michael was already standing and keepy-upping a ball. Coach and captain looked at each other and smiled.

After school on the Wednesday after the game, Freddy and Wil were munching on crisps and beginning their usual leisure time activity. Hardy was in the far corner of the room, head deep in a large yellow book.

'You got Firmino?', said Wil abruptly.

'No, but I need him, will you swap him for Kepa?', replied Freddy.

'Whoah! Hang on a minute! Wait for me!' Hardy raced across the big room to join them at the table, yellow folder in hand.

'Right, I need Salah, five star shiny although I don't know why, and I also need Jagielka and Brewster to complete Sheffield United, and if I don't get Phil Foden soon I'll probably DIE, and Ramsdale is WAY better than Allison, and who's got Olise, I really need him I really really do, and why have Arsenal got two five star shinies especially Lacazette who doesn't even want to play, and I'll swap all my Watfords for just one Paul Pogba, and if you've got a Mason Greenwood I'll swap him for two Harry Maguires and a couple of Freds if you like, and I wish I could be on these cards, maybe we should make our own team, I could be the first match winner goalkeeper, has anyone got a spare James Rodrigues?'

Wil and Freddy collapsed on the floor laughing, still clutching their own folders. Hardy joined them, and managed to pick up a card which had fallen to the floor out of one of the folders. They pounced on him as he tried to slip it into his own collection. It took two of them to hold him down as they prized it

(the relatively obscure Marc Guehi) out of his hands. They all laughed and lay there, breathing heavily.

There was a knock at the door which Freddy went to answer. He looked out of the window before opening the door. It was Mr Andrews.

'Ah, hello Freddy, don't forget training on Friday after school. I'll see you all there, please tell the others, and...oh...you'll need this'.

With that Mr Andrews handed Freddy a luminous yellow football and a carrot.