

Let the Games Begin – Day 1

The twittering of the soggy birds. The squelching of a thousand tiny feet. The chattering of a hundred damp children.

That's right. Lancaster Road were about to play their first match.

The week before the game had been wet. It had rained and rained and rained. During the day it had rained, and during the night, it had poured. During a brief break in the rain, there had been a hailstorm. The team had met up at Freddy's house but had been unable to train. Instead they had spent time watching replays of Match of the Day.

'Yo...Yo!', yelled Hardy triumphantly as David James flew the length of his goal to stop a Villa free kick.

'Wow...!', said Wil as Reading's Yakou Meite headed one in against Bristol.

'Hmmm?... ', said Freddy, as Ronaldo tripped over a nasty blade of grass against Milan.

And Michael said nothing at all. He sat there, silently watching, studying. Occasionally an eyebrow would raise, his leg would twitch as if he was about to emulate one of his heros, or his head would nod in quiet acknowledgement of a great goal. At the end of the programme, he smiled contentedly to himself.

When Saturday finally arrived, their tiny feet squelched onto the pitch, alongside the other teams. They jogged over to pitch E, where their match against Hurst Rovers was due to take place.

Freddy's daydreaming had now become a reality. He looked out at the scene in front of him. Hundreds of children getting ready to play. All nervous, excited, and inspired at the same time. Looking around he thought to himself, *We can do well, we really can*, and then other thoughts challenged him, *but, we've never played before, what if we get beaten?*

Just then Clara, who had brought a yellow World Cup football with her, tried to kick it the length of the pitch towards the goal, but she ended up slipping on the wet ground and falling flat on her back with a splash in a muddy puddle. She lay there still for a few seconds, then started laughing crazily. Freddy had to smile too. He woke from his daydream.

'Right boys and girls! Remember what I said! Enjoy yourselves! Give a hundred percent!'

Mr Andrews, who was taking his coaching role very seriously, had written out small cards for each of the players, which he was now handing out to them. Freddy's card read *Up and at 'em, boy!* Wil took his and saw the words *Fear Nothing!* written in a spidery handwriting.

Actually there was nothing to fear, because they were all lined up against an invisible opposition. With a minute to go, Hurst had not yet turned up.

But just then, a small army emerged from the dressing room area. Clad in bright yellow with green edgings, four or five coaches accompanied the team of ten players onto the playing surface. They jogged professionally over towards the Lancaster Road players. Handshakes all round. Freddy was impressed when one of them said '*G'day, skipper!*' to him. He looked proudly at the captain's band on his left arm, as he went to meet the referee in the middle.

The whistle went. Rovers kicked off. Game on!

United started with Hardy in goal, a defence comprising Jaz and Wil, Freddy and Alex in midfield, and with Clara and Michael up front. JoJo was controversially left on the bench and stood there miserably, dressed in a blue tracksuit.

Right from the start, it was obvious that Rovers had more organisation, more training behind them, several strong (if not the most skilful) players, and that Mr Andrews had been right in identifying one player in particular, called Skip, who was small and fast. When he got the ball things seemed to happen. Twice he got away from Freddy in the midfield, and almost reached a point where he could shoot. On both occasions Jaz put in good tackles. The third time, Skip rounded Wil, shot low to the left corner, but then saw Hardy leap brilliantly to turn it round the post for a corner.

'*Yo Yo Ma!*', he yelled as he picked himself up and pumped the air with his fists, '*Come ON, United!*'

The game went from one end to the other, with Mr Andrews encouraging them from the sidelines, occasionally suggesting a tactical move, but more often just going for general advice,

'*Give it some welly, lad!*' '*Good girl! Now, up to Michael!*'

And up to Michael it went. Picking it up on halfway, he dipped his shoulder, went round two Rovers players, flicked the ball up into the air, then nodded it across the Rovers goal to an unmarked Clara who simply tapped it home for the opening goal.

One-Nil to Lancaster Road!

The crowd, composed of parents and friends, cheered and stamped their feet in joy at the goal. Or rather squished their feet into to muddy turf. The Rovers fans, who had seemed confident of victory, went suddenly quiet. The only other reaction to the goal came from the neighbouring pitch, where an old lady, dressed in black, muttered to herself and thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her coat.

The last move of the first half was started by Hardy's long kick out from goal, which landed at the feet of Alex. Alex tried to trap the ball but it bounced under his foot. As it bounced up however, Alex jumped high in the air to volley a pass out to Michael on the right wing. Several of the watching crowd applauded this audacious move.

But applause turned to murmurs of consternation around the ground as Michael went down awkwardly under a challenge from the Rovers' captain Skip.

The murmurs turned to a deathly hush as Michael seemed not to be moving.

Then sighs of relief as he lifted his arms weakly, and was helped up. Two of the Rovers coaches helped

Michael stagger from the field, although he seemed not to know where he was. The referee blew for half-time. Mr Andrews stood scratching his wrinkled head, muttering sadly to himself.

What on earth were they going to do now?
