BALLER BOYS VS THE BULLDOZERS

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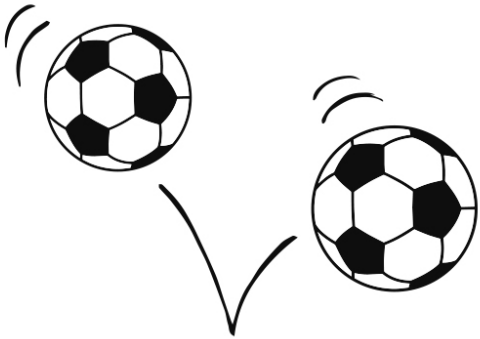
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For my Grandson Rayne, every time I watch you play football, I feel inspired to write. Thank you for being my wingman and sharing your ideas with me and checking that my writing is authentic.

In loving memory of Reece Darcheville



CHAPTER 1

Not Enough Football!

"Tandeep, pass!" Shay yelled.

Tandeep crossed the ball down the centre, away from the Stokey Town midfielders towards Shay. Running down the centre of the pitch, chasing the ball, the two Stokey Town midfielders were hot on Shay's heels. But Shay's lack of fitness was clear to see, when both Stokey Town midfielders sped past him, taking the ball with them.

Shay stopped, breathing hard. He threw his arms up in the air in frustration. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes, but he didn't want to cry in front of everyone, so he took several long, deep breaths until the feeling passed.

Stokey Town manoeuvred the ball back into the direction of AC United's goal, out running AC's defenders Blessing and Troy. Stokey Town left AC chasing the ball, leaving their opponents unmarked. This enabled Stokey Town to find their unmarked striker and pass him the ball, which he neatly and precisely tucked into the back of the AC net.

The Stokey Town fans cheered, whistled and clapped, encouraging their players on, while AC looked on in shock wondering what had just happened.

"You lot, mark up!" Maxwell, the AC goalie yelled at the team. He was disappointed in himself for letting the goal in, and he felt frustrated with the team for not stopping the Stokey Town striker from getting through to score. Immediately, AC ran closer to the opponents they should have been marking. Shay made sure that this time he was marking his opponent close enough to touch his arm.

"Come on boys, keep your heads up!" Coach Joe yelled from the side-lines.

It was 1-0 to Stokey Town with five minutes left of play and they were running rings around AC. Frankie finally managed to get possession of the ball and tackled a Stokey Town midfielder. Frankie fought hard to keep the ball but was eventually forced to cross it to his teammate (and least favourite person) Hassan once he realised that he couldn't outskill his opponent.

"Take a shot Hassan! Take a shot!" Coach Joe screamed as Hassan hurtled towards the Stokey Town goal.

A Stokey Town defender went in for a tackle, kicking Hassan's ankle. Hassan fell to the floor rolling in agony.

The referee blew the whistle and shouted, "Penalty," and he pointed at AC United.

AC clapped their hands in agreement with the ref's decision and looked over at Coach Joe for the next move.

Yes, a chance for us to win one back, Shay thought.

"Shay, you take it and the rest of you move forward ready for a rebound!" Coach Joe ordered from the side-line.

Hassan stood up on one leg and rolled his ankle. He looked over at Shay and gave him a thumbs-up.

Running into position, Shay steadied himself to take the shot. He was usually good at taking penalties, so he wasn't sure why his legs were shaking, and his heart was beating so fast. Maybe it was the pressure of knowing that it could be their only chance to get a goal and equalise.

"Come on Shay, you've got this!"

He knew his mum's voice anywhere. She was always the loudest of all the parents.

With all the screaming and yelling going on around him, Shay had to block out the noise and focus. He took

a deep breath to steady his nerves and visualised where he was going to place the ball. He wanted it to land in the top right-hand corner of the net. The goal-keeper looked tall for an under-ten and was hopping about from foot to foot, his arms stretched out wide.

Shay ran up to the football, pulled back his right leg and kicked it with such force that it fired into the top right-hand corner of the net just like he'd planned! Shay had never heard the AC fans cheer so loud. The final whistle blew, and the game ended on a draw.



Coach Joe waved them over. His slim, six-foot-six frame towered over the tired players as they flopped down on the ground. "It was your first friendly of the season and we could see you were giving it your all, so well done. However, it seems like most of your football over

the summer must have been online and not in the park!" Coach Joe raised an eyebrow.

Shay and Frankie looked at each other sheepishly knowing that they had spent most of the summer playing FIFA.

"Think of today as a warm-up for when the season starts in a couple of weeks," Coach Joe continued.

Coach Kaan nodded in agreement. His cap was pulled down covering his low cropped hair. Shay noticed Coach Kaan was wearing a necklace with a blue eye symbol.

"Coach Kaan, what's that eye?" Shay asked pointing at the necklace.

Coach Kaan held it. "Oh, it's called a Nazar. Lost of Turkish people wear them or have them in their homes. As part of our culture, we believe it keeps us safe and brings us good luck . . . and talking of luck, I think you know that we were lucky to get a draw today. Thankfully, we've got time to improve, and we don't have a full squad yet, as Troy and Jamie are still away. We're also expecting a new player to join us soon, so we will get better as a team."

"What new player?" Shay asked.

"You'll find out on Friday," Coach Kaan replied, and Shay huffed. He hated not knowing what was going on.

"Maybe we should all wear a Nazar necklace for luck," Oscar joked.



"My dad's Irish and he has a four-leaf clover for luck," Frankie said.

Coach Joe scoffed. "Guys, luck? Really!

"You gotta work hard, can't just rely on luck.
If you don't stay active, you're gonna get stuck!
You can't sit still and rely on luck.
Take time to practice, you'll see it's worth it.
You know the old saying . . .
Practice makes perfect!"

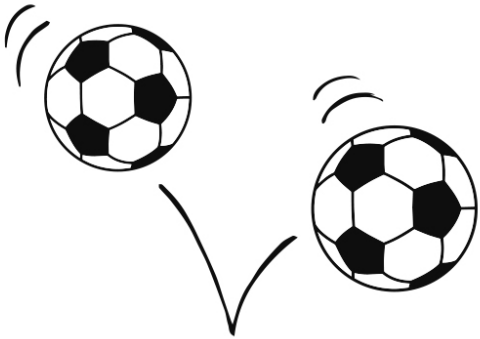
If Coach Joe hadn't got into football, he would have definitely been a rapper. AC clapped their hands and Coach Joe gave a mock bow.

"Now I need everyone on time and ready to work hard to start our pre-season training," Coach Joe said, serious again. "Let's get our fitness even better than last season. Everyone up!" The players stood, dusting off the grass from their shorts. "Before you go off and enjoy the rest of your day, right hand in."

Everyone huddled together and put their right hands into the middle on top of each other.

Coach Joe shouted, "3, 2, 1!"

And they shouted back, "UNITED!"



CHAPTER 2

Changes

It was Thursday night and Frankie couldn't sleep due to the unusually hot September weather. Although it was way past his bedtime, he was thirsty and needed some water. The bedroom door creaked as Frankie carefully opened it. Creeping down the stairs he was surprised to see the living room door open and his parents sitting down on the couch with their backs to him.

"It's a really nice house Colin, with a bigger garden and four nice-sized bedrooms. It would be great for the kids," his mum Tina said.

Frankie sat down on the bottom step confused. *What house?*

"The kitchen will need doing up, but we can make it our own and it has two bathrooms!" she continued.

Even though he knew he shouldn't be earwigging, Frankie was frozen to the spot. His head began to spin with a thousand thoughts.

When did they decide we were moving? They can't be serious. I've just made the team! How can they do this to me?



No longer thirsty, Frankie crept back to his room, careful not to alert anyone. He climbed into bed and stared up at the ceiling. With all the questions he now had, he couldn't get back to sleep.

*

The next morning Frankie sat at the breakfast table with his head in his hands. He was exhausted and keeping his head up required too much effort. His little sister Katie was on her best form today, singing and dancing around the kitchen, begging him to watch her. She kept poking him to get his attention.

"Katie, just leave me alone!" he finally snapped.

Katie's mouth dropped open before her bottom lip began to tremble, and she burst into loud, noisy sobs.

"Frankie, don't speak to your sister like that," Tina snapped. "What is the matter with you this morning? I was just going to tell you how good your summer project is and now this."

Frankie didn't answer, instead he turned his head away from his mum.

"Katie, come here love, don't cry. Frankie, apologise to your sister!" Tina hugged Katie and glared at Frankie over her shoulder.

"Sorry Katie." Frankie sighed as he pushed his cereal around in the bowl with his spoon.

"And can you stop messing around with your food," Tina said.

"I'm not hungry," Frankie mumbled back.

"Really? Okay fine, go get your trainers on then. We need to get the last bits of school uniform for you and your sister."

Whilst doing up his laces, Frankie wondered what was the point in getting more uniform if they were moving? He couldn't believe his parents were doing this and hadn't even spoken to him. He wanted to ask them about it but then that would make the whole moving thing real, and he didn't want it to be.

*

Meanwhile, a few doors down, Shay was stuck into his school summer project – endangered birds. All he wanted to do was go online and play with his friends, but his mum had put her foot down. No games until the school project was finally done.

Shay stared at his work feeling proud of himself. It was hard but he was finally finished on his summer project about nightingales.

"Mum, can you look at it for me please? My teacher said anyone who does a good conservation project and brings it in on the first day back will get ten house points straight away," Shay explained.

"Let me just finish putting your school uniform away and see if Rayne is still okay playing in the garden," Joanne said.

Fifteen minutes later Joanne went to sit with her eldest at the kitchen table.

"I coloured the nightingale in and wrote this as the title," Shay said pointing to the title at the top of the first page.

"Nightingales, the singing birds," Joanne read out. "I think that's the perfect title, well done Shay. So, why are they a protected bird?"

"Because their numbers are going down as they are losing their habitat. I also wrote this bit about their beautiful singing and that not many people get to hear it. Did you know that it's actually the male bird singing at night trying to attract a female?"

"Why don't people get to hear it?"

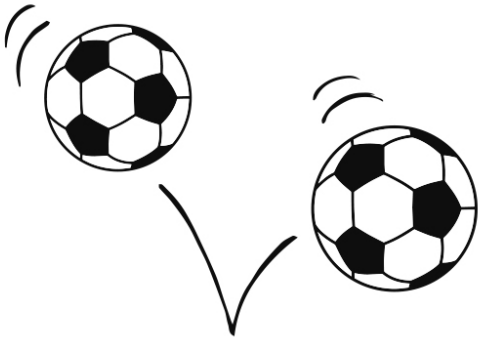
"Ermm, let me see what I wrote, oh yeah, because they're like owls, they usually come out at night."

"Oh, are they nocturnal?"

"Yeah, that's the word, thanks Mum, I'm gonna use it in my writing, it'll impress my teacher."

Joanne kissed him on the forehead. "Shay it's brilliant. See what happens when you focus!" She gently nudged him, and Shay laughed.

"I know, I know . . . can I play FIFA now?"



CHAPTER 3

May The Best Baller Win!

That evening, Shay was in his living room, playing an intense game of FIFA online with Frankie.

"I can't wait for the season to really get started. This season belongs to *us*; the dream team are back in business!" Shay said excitedly into his headphones. His fingers moved swiftly over the control buttons. "Frankie man, I'm so happy you made the main team this season. Last season, when you came on as a sub, you were so good. I knew this time you would make it through at the trials. You're so fast and you've got skills, but for your shots, *please* make sure you're wearing your glasses so you can see properly."

"Yeah, I will." Frankie chuckled. "I wear them most of the time now and always for football. I'm making sure that I can see my target!"

"I saw Troy at the barbers yesterday and he was getting his Afro shaped up. I got my sides faded and my mum twisted the top to look like Tyrone Mings'," Shay said. "The barbers was packed with kids getting their hair cut for school this week. That's how you can always tell when the summer holidays are over."

"I can't wait to see the whole team at training," Frankie said.

"Oh, yeah, even Hassan?" Shay teased.

"Well, of course not Hassan! Last season he was so rude to me just because I was in the development team. He was always trying to leave me out and didn't invite me to his dad's restaurant, remember?" Frankie frowned, still annoyed at the memory.

"Yeah, he was a bit much. I think he was jealous of you because you're faster than him. Anyway, don't worry about him, you've made the team now. And so far, he's been alright with you."

"True, and this time I'm coming to his restaurant if we're invited and I'm going to eat all the kebabs!" Frankie quipped and they burst out laughing.

"Do you know what? This season I'm going all out," Shay said. "I'm going for Baller Boy and I'm going to work so hard that Coach Reece will have no choice but

to choose me. I even tried to get my dad to buy me the rainbow-coloured sock boots. I told him that they would help improve my performance, but he said they were too expensive and that I would just have to use my natural ability."

"Wait! I was thinking the same thing," Frankie said.

"What about my natural talent?" Shay joked.

"No, about me going for Baller Boy."

Shay frowned, surprised at Frankie's comment.

But he's only just made the team, he's a good player, but I think he has a lot of work to do, Shay thought to himself.

Not wanting to discourage his best friend or fall out with him like last season, Shay said out loud, "May the best footballer win!"

Frankie had worked so hard in the development squad and to *finally* get selected for the main team meant everything to him. He was determined to be crowned this season's Baller Boy.

What's the harm in a bit of friendly competition between friends? Frankie thought.

He had fallen out with Shay over football before and he didn't want that to happen again.

Frankie wanted to tell Shay that he had heard his parents talking about moving house. He needed to let this big secret out but then Shay yawned through the headphones.

Maybe this isn't the best time, Frankie thought.

From behind him, Frankie heard his front door open, and he knew it was his dad coming back from work. His dad was a firefighter and Frankie adored him.

Shay sighed loudly. "Frankie, I've got to go now. My mum says after six weeks off school I've got to get back into my *bedtime routine*," Shay said mimicking his mum's voice. "We don't even go back to school till next week!"

"I can't believe we're going into Year Five," Frankie said.

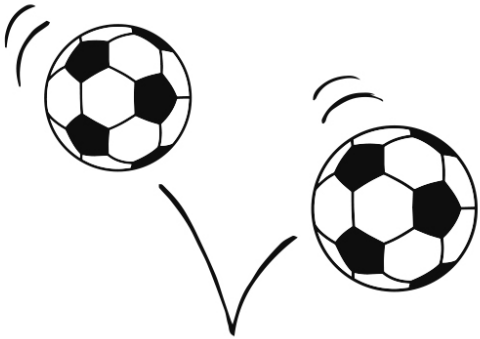
"Oh, she's coming! Frankie, I'd better go, I'll see you tomorrow . . . yes Mum, I'm logging off," and a second later Shay was gone.

Sitting in his bedroom, alone with his thoughts, Frankie wondered if he should speak to his dad about going for Baller Boy this season but then he remembered his parent's conversation.

What if Dad tells me not to bother because I'll be leaving AC soon?

The thought of leaving made Frankie feel like bursting into tears.

No, he decided. *I won't say anything for now.*



CHAPTER 4

Back Together

The first few weeks of the new football season were always exciting for everyone on the team. Chatting away excitedly, AC United greeted each other whilst also looking out for the new player Coach Kaan had told them about.

Jamie, who was affectionately known as the 'fidgety boy,' was back, and as usual was on the go. Last season the players had learnt that Jamie has ADHD. His mum Kathy was always nearby keeping a close eye on him.

While strolling across the grass, Shay stopped and observed Jamie, who was performing perfect cartwheels back-to-back. His red, shoulder-length hair was flying all over the place. A ball flew in Jamie's direction and Shay watched him stop his cartwheel, pass the ball

back and then resume his cartwheel, all without pausing to take a breath!

Jamie's lips were moving, as if he was talking to someone. Shay thought it was safe to assume he was humming away to himself. Shay waved at him, but Jamie appeared not to notice. He was now too busy trying to balance on his hands! Nearby, Jamie's mum Kathy today with green hair (every few weeks she liked to dye her hair a different colour) spotted Shay waving so she waved back to him.

Everyone was crowded around Oscar who was unusually early. His blonde hair had been cut so short it looked like he had spikes on his head.

"So, on YouTube, I've got over 1,500 subscribers." Oscar puffed up his chest. "I'm planning to give Kevin Hart a run for his money. Trust me, any day now some big agent will see my videos, snap me up and I'll be all over your screens."

"Yeah right." Blessing rolled his eyes. He spotted Shay and fist bumped him. "That was my uncle's barber shop you were in the other day. He shaped you up good." Blessing admired Shay's fade and twists.

Most of the team were present but when Shay looked over at Frankie, he noticed the sour expression on his face. As he followed the direction Frankie was looking in, he saw why . . . Hassan.

Hassan was swaggering towards them with his shoulders back, chest out, and a wide grin plastered on his

face. He was the tallest of all the players and the most competitive. On his feet he wore the high-top rainbow-sock boots that Shay wanted and across his shoulder he carried the matching rainbow-coloured sports bag.



Shay looked at Hassan's boots with envy and hoped his dad might let him have them for his birthday, but he knew it was unlikely as they were so expensive.

Hassan walked into the centre of the group and immediately started talking over everyone else. "My uncle queued up early outside the sports shop to get these for me and my cousin. We got two of the first pairs released." He balanced on his left foot, lifting his right foot up to show off the rainbow-sock boots, as the boys admired his new footwear.

"Nice boots, Hassan," Frankie commented but Hassan ignored him.

Frankie swallowed hard.

"Our favourite show-off's back. Let's all give him a round of applause!" Oscar said, clapping his hands and making the boys snigger.

Hassan's face went red and he walked off in a huff.

"Anyway, did any of you hear about the fields being sold?" Oscar asked.

"What fields?" Maxwell frowned.

"These fields!" Oscar said holding his arms out. "Marshals!"

"Whatever, funny guy," Blessing said, and they all laughed.

Oscar crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at them.

"Where did you hear that?" Shay asked.

"From my neighbour who works for the council," Oscar answered.

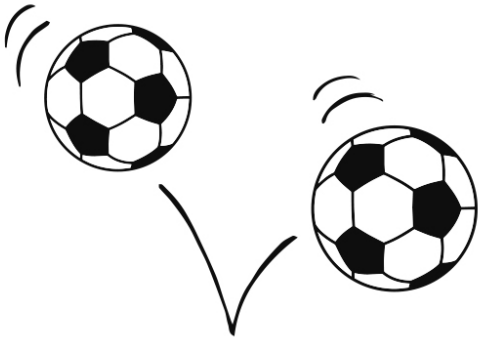
"You serious or is this another one of your jokes?" Frankie raised an eyebrow at him.

"Oh, get lost, you lot! You wait and see!" Oscar snapped before walking away.

"Oscar come back!" Shay called out after him. "We're not sure if you're joking or not."

"If you are, it's not funny!" Blessing yelled in Oscar's direction.

"Exactly! Imagine anyone trying to sell our pitch? I don't think so!" Shay said.



CHAPTER 5

No Girls Allowed

Shay spotted two people walking towards them wearing turbans, and knew it was Tandeep and his dad. Last season, Shay and Tandeep had developed a good scoring partnership. Tandeep would pass the ball to Shay in the centre of the pitch, then Tandeep would sprint forward past the opposing defender. Shay would then quickly play a neat through ball back to Tandeep. He would play the ball into the box where Shay would be waiting to tuck it into the net, leaving the opposition scratching their heads and wondering what had just happened. Coach Joe had worked them hard to get this play right and it always worked. The memories brought a smile to Shay's face.

"I wonder who made it through the trials?" Shay asked the rest of the team. "Apart from Frankie, I thought there were a couple of other talented players."

The trials had been three weeks ago, during the summer break, and all the AC players had been re-selected for the team.

"Can you believe those two girls that tried out for our team? What a joke!" Oscar said rolling his eyes and smirking.

"Yeah, as if they would be good enough to join AC!" Blessing added.

"That girl was good," Maxwell said.

"What girl?" Shay frowned as he tried to remember.

"Oh, I know which one you mean!" Frankie said. "She was wearing black and purple boots. The one whose shots went in every time and was *almost* as fast as me and Hassan."

"Oh her." Shay shrugged. "Yeah, she was alright!"

Shay was certain a girl couldn't be as good as him at shooting and scoring.

"I think her name was Ashleigh or something like that. Anyway, who cares if girls join us?" Maxwell said. "Some girls are really good players. Look at Sam Kerr and Georgia Stanway, and the Lionesses won the Euros!"

"But they're adults. Most girls our age aren't good at football," Blessing argued.

"That's not true. Alexia on Essex Road Giants is really good," Maxwell said.

"Well, there's no girls good enough for AC," Blessing insisted with a mouth full of crisps.

"I thought Ashleigh was alright," Frankie added.

"AC United is definitely an all-boys team. I agree with Blessing," Hassan said as he marched over. "There are no girls good enough to join us and there never will be!"

Shay would never admit it out loud, but he secretly agreed.

"Well, I don't agree, I think if they're good enough to join us then they should be allowed," Frankie insisted.

"I bet you're just looking for a girlfriend," Oscar teased, and the others laughed.

"Oh, whatever Oscar," Frankie replied. He could see a familiar face near the main gates and pointed. "Look!"

Everyone turned to look. With a fresh, low trimmed Afro, Troy was trotting over. Finally, the team were all here!

"Boys!" Coach Joe yelled, motioning with his large hands for the players to come closer to him as he walked towards them. He had been standing on the

other side of the pitch, behind the goal, chatting away to an older Black man with shoulder length greying locs, dressed in a Hammers football top. He was holding the hand of a child dressed in an AC training kit.

Frankie grinned to himself as he recognised the child from the trials, grateful that his glasses were helping him to see better.

"Right guys, before we get started, I just need to remind you all about our no nuts or fish policy, we need to remember that Shay is allergic to them. I'll also send out a reminder in the WhatsApp group. Now, I'd like you to meet a player who came to our trials and who'll be joining our team." Coach Joe looked at the two people standing at the far end of the pitch beside the goal and used his hand to gesture for the child to come over.

"This is Ashleigh, and I'm expecting you all to make her feel welcome," Coach Joe said.

Ashleigh was wearing a brand-new AC United training kit, a well-used pair of purple and black football boots and a huge smile across her face, showing off perfect teeth and dimples. She wore her long Afro hair in one large bunch that sat loosely on the top of her head making her look taller than she was. In fact, she was about as tall as Shay.

"Welcome Ashleigh," Coach Joe said. "I made up a special rap for you.



"You're the first girl to try out for this team,
And at the trials you played like a dream.
You earned your place, so you got invited
So welcome Ashleigh to AC United!"

"Thanks Coach, that was great!" Ashleigh grinned.

Shay's eyes bulged and Hassan's mouth dropped open.

"Guys, introduce yourselves and tell Ashleigh your position. Let's start with you, Mr Comedian." Coach Joe pointed at Oscar.

"I'm Oscar, I play midfield and I'm here to entertain you!" Oscar said in an animated voice before he gave a mock bow. Everyone laughed.