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Shoot to Win

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PART 1 – THE SEMI-FINAL

1. Semi Conscious

Thursday 22 May

Interschool Cup Semi-Final
35 Minutes Played

Kingfield 0-0 Oak Hall

Jamie flung his body across the turf to make the tackle. He had tracked the Oak Hall midfielder all the way and, when the time was right, he'd made his move.

But Jamie Johnson was not a defender and he never would be.

Jamie was the best left winger in the whole school. He had the pace to beat any defender. So why was Mr Hansard playing him at wing-back? And how could he do it in a game as important as the Schools Cup Semi-Final?

It was stupid. Pointless.

Jamie should have been Kingfield's most dangerous weapon, not the one doing all the defending. If they were going to go out of the Cup, they should at least go out trying to win the game.

It was 0-0 and, with ten minutes left until half-time, Jamie realised that the Oak Hall 'keeper hadn't made one save yet. It was actually embarrassing.

Jamie looked at the crowd watching the game from touchline. There were probably about 100 people there. He dreaded to think what they were making of Kingfield's long-ball tactics.

There had been a few whispers that some scouts from professional clubs might even be coming to check Jamie out today. But even if any of them *had* turned up, they would hardly be impressed by a winger who wasn't allowed to enter the opposition half.

It was as if Mr Hansard wanted to play him so deep that no one would spot his talent.

Jamie wiped his shirtsleeve across his forehead to soak up the sweat. He was waiting, impatiently for Oak Hall to take their throw in.

Deep down, he knew this cup run might be his last chance of earning a trial with a professional club. He was 14. If it didn't happen now, it probably never would. It was time for him to show what he could do.

2. On the Run

Jamie raced to intercept the Oak Hall throw-in and won possession of the ball.

If was going to stick to Hansard's tactics, Jamie now had to whack the ball into the channel for Ashish Khan to chase. But Jamie didn't feel like sticking to the plan.

Jamie pushed the ball a good ten yards in front of him so he could really open up his stride. As soon as he started running, his pace kicked in; he rocketed down the line. The Oak Hall right back came across to close him down but Jamie just flew past him.

He felt his marker try to clip his ankle and it would have been a free-kick…if Jamie had gone down. But he didn't. He wasn't going to stop now; he just kept on running.

Jamie drove further and further forward, deep in to the heart of Oak Hall territory. As he approached the penalty area, the crowd on the touchline strained their necks to keep up with the action. Now they were seeing the *real* Jamie Johnson.

One more defender - that's all Jamie had to beat.

"Yes! Play me!' shouted Ash. He was the only player who'd been quick enough to keep up with Jamie. He was making a run across the box to the penalty spot.

Jamie looked up and shaped to cross it to Ash; that's exactly what everyone would be expecting him to do. But Jamie wanted to do something a little bit more special than that. He wanted to do something for any of the scouts that might be there. He wanted to go all the way himself.

Jamie put his head down and dashed towards the last Oak Hall defender. When he got close enough, he moved his left foot over the ball with a flourish to make it seem as though he was going to go on the outside. Then, just as the defender closed him down, he pushed the ball inside with his right foot to head straight for goal.

It was a classic step-over. There was just one problem: the defender didn't buy it. He'd stayed on his feet and kept his eye on the ball. He tackled Jamie just as he was on the brink of a brilliant individual goal.

Jamie squeezed his eyes shut and threw his head up to the sky. "Aaagh!" he growled in anguish. He'd been so close. Why didn't his step-over work? All the best wingers were wicked at step-overs…

"Johnson!!" Hansard roared from the sidelines. "Get baaack!!"

Jamie turned around to see that the defender that had tackled him was now leading an Oak Hall counter attack. There was a huge gap down Kingfield's left flank – exactly where Jamie should have been.

With no one to mark him, the Oak Hall player had been able to get all the way to the edge of the penalty area, from where he delivered a sumptuous curling cross to the far post.

The ball sailed effortlessly over all the Kingfield defenders' heads, finding its target of the tall Oak Hall striker. The attacker sprung high into the air and pulled his head back before jerking it forward again with power and precision to fire the ball across the goal towards the far corner of the net.

Jamie had only got back as far as the half-way line. He was still out of breath from his own run. As his lungs panted their exhaustion, he knew that Hansard would blame him for this goal. He could already hear the abuse coming his way.

But then Calum Fogarty, the Kingfield goalkeeper, flew into the air, clawing towards the ball like an eagle swooping for its prey. He got the ends of his fingertips to it, and touched it around the post for the corner.

He hadn't just saved a goal. He's saved Jamie too.

"Johnson!" bellowed Hansard. He sounded more like an army general than a football coach. "Get back and defend the corner! Play for the team, not for yourself!"

"You tell him, Sir!" shouted Dillon Simmonds, Jamie's biggest enemy on the team. "It's like we're playing with ten men!"

Jamie sprinted back towards his goal. If they wanted to see how fast he could run, he'd show them. Why was it always him that they had a go at? Why couldn't they pick on someone else for a change?

And what did either of them know about football anyway?