

## CHAPTER 22

# NEW CLUB

After Fran's performance at the World Cup – plus another successful season with Reading that led to their promotion to WSL 1 – the premier clubs soon came knocking. They were competing to sign up the talents of England's little Messi, and Fran was soon in negotiations with Reading regarding transfers.

'Who wants a piece of you today, Fran?' asked her dad.

'Well, it's looking like it's between Arsenal and Chelsea at the minute!'

'Who would have thought... you loved Thierry Henry so much. And now you might be playing for his team.'



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‘I know. It was always my dream to play for Arsenal. But I’ve given it a lot of thought. I think I’m going to go with Chelsea.’

‘Because they’re top of the league?’

‘It’s not just that. I think the whole team has got a winning mentality.’

But it was her meeting with Chelsea’s manager Emma Hayes that clinched it. Fran instantly warmed to her broad smile and direct way of talking.

‘We’ve had our eye on you for a while, Fran. I think you’re the missing piece for our team.’

Fran was particularly looking forward to seeing how well she’d fit with the other players up front. She knew Eni Aluko from the England team, but she was also looking forward to playing alongside the talented South Korean midfielder Ji So-yun and the winger Gemma Davison.

But just as Fran was about to sign the contract, Manchester City approached her. They were willing to pay even more than the sizeable amount Chelsea had already offered.

‘Let the bidding wars commence!’ her dad



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laughed. ‘My little girl – in so much demand.’

James beamed with pride. ‘I’m going to start taking bets on which other teams will wade in!’

But Fran’s mind was made up. ‘No, I’m definitely going with Chelsea. Manchester is too far away.’

‘You sure, pet?’ her dad responded.

Fran looked at her brother and dad. ‘Yes. I think I’d miss the pair of you winding me up half the time. What with your footie feedback and all, Dad.’

They both laughed but Fran could tell they were relieved at her decision.

Leaving Reading behind for London would be hard, though. She thought of all the nights on her way to training at Hogwood Park with her mum. It was as though she was properly leaving her childhood behind.

Kelly tried not to cry as she hugged Fran goodbye. ‘I’m happy for you, really I am. We know you’ve got to go on and grow and keep developing.’

‘Grow? No I think I’m stuck at this height for good now, Kelly!’

‘Little Geordie Fran!’



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They laughed.

‘I couldn’t have done it without you, Kelly. Really, both you and Jayne have made me the player I am today.’

For Fran, the last few months had been a whirlwind of change and new opportunities for her. But she remained positive about her decision and knew she was taking the right step forward in her career.

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After Fran pulled on her Number 14 shirt, she looked down at her bright pink nails in the dressing room. She’d painted them the night before with her teammates, who were now new recruits to one of her oldest and most favourite pre-match rituals. This time she’d let Eni choose the colour.

She checked the fit of her boots one last time. Yes, they felt great. She’d worn them in throughout training, which was always her preference before a big game. Most footballers she knew had a couple of ‘superstitions’ they followed before a match but they’d certainly served her well throughout her



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career. And she hoped they'd help her deliver some magic in her next match.

She was about to walk out at the Wheatsheaf Stadium with her Chelsea teammates. They faced Sunderland Ladies. She chuckled to herself. Why did it have to be Sunderland? Her poor dad. She knew he'd be genuinely torn as he cheered her on against his home side. But she knew he'd also be incredibly proud if they won. If the match ended in victory they'd become Women's Super League 1 Champions for the first time.

'Ready, Fran?' Eni and Gemma interrupted her thoughts.

'I am!' cried Fran as she high-fived them both. 'But are Sunderland ready?!'

'No-one's ever ready for mini Messi!'

'Don't mess with mini Messi!'

They all laughed. Fran realised the nickname gave her quite a lot to live up to and she'd felt the pressure of it ever since Mark had first tagged her with it back in the summer.

'Everyone expects me to be shooting fifty goals

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a minute!’ she said to her dad. But she felt more relaxed about the accolades now. The summer already felt like a long time ago and she was getting into her stride with Chelsea, and proving that she was no one-hit wonder.

She’d joked that the transition into ‘the Blues’ wasn’t that much of a change as her new kit was ‘practically the same colour’ as the one she’d worn in The Royals back in Reading. But it hadn’t taken long to fit in and within weeks her new team felt like one big family.

Just before the whistle blew for the game against Sunderland, Eni turned to Fran with an excited expression on her face and said: ‘You’ll never guess who’s in the crowd. John Terry!’

Fran’s face broke out into a huge infectious smile, a feature of hers that was becoming as well-known and loved as her quick-paced feet. She whooped. ‘Then let’s show him what we can do!’

Right from the kick-off, Chelsea controlled the pace of the game. Within seven minutes Eni burst down the left flank and shot a long pass towards goal



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that Ji netted to open the scoring. There were cheers around the stadium as the girls hugged each other tight, happy to have secured the lead so early. From the first time Fran had played with Chelsea she'd felt a particularly strong bond with the team's winger Gemma – they seemed to have an innate feel for where each other was on the pitch. Just before half time they proved what a dynamic pair they made as Gemma shot a cross into the penalty area for Fran to finish. They leapt around together in delight.

And neither of them was done yet. Later in the match they demonstrated the strength of their partnership once again when Fran ran onto a perfect pass from Gemma, before finishing coolly. Another huge smile broke out across her face as she skidded on the pitch and fell to the ground to celebrate with her teammates. They'd conceded no goals. The championship was well within their reach.

'Brilliant goal, Fran!'

'I'm so happy with that one!' she cried.

Eni scored once more to make it 4–0. When the whistle blew for the end of the match, both John

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Terry and manager and coach Emma Hayes ran on to the pitch to celebrate with them.

Emma grabbed Fran and hugged her. 'I knew you were our missing piece!'

'Well, I really feel like I belong here!' replied Fran as tears of happiness ran down her face. In her first season she'd helped Chelsea secure their first FA WSL title: a league and cup double.





## CHAPTER 23

# RAY OF HOPE

Fran watched in disbelief from the sidelines. It was April 2018 and there was a beautiful clear blue sky at the Wembley Stadium that day. Fran thought The Blues would be celebrating an easy victory over Manchester City in the sun later that day (despite the fact her childhood hero Jill Scott was playing for the opposition). But it wasn't turning out as they'd expected. It was the Women's FA Cup semi-final and City had just taken the lead after half-time, while Chelsea were yet to score. It looked as though the away team were destined for their first ever final.

How was this happening? Fran felt frustrated. She was sitting on the sidelines as a substitute,



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but wanted to get out on the pitch and make a difference. They were already well into the second half, and Chelsea desperately needed a ray of hope.

Finally, in the seventy-sixth minute, Emma turned to Fran. ‘Okay, you’re on.’

Fran rushed onto the field, determined to equalise for her team. But she couldn’t find any spaces in defence or make as many penetrating runs as she normally did. She looked over towards Gemma who seemed equally frustrated. She’d made some great shots on target throughout the match but seemed a little lost without Fran. But then their breakthrough came.

With only a few minutes of regulation time to go, Ji scored from a curling free kick. Fran sighed with relief. They’d scraped through into extra time by the skin of their teeth. Ji’s goal had lifted their spirits though. Chelsea started to get better possession of the ball and kept striving to make assists and shots on target – all were denied, though.

But it was Fran Kirby who scored in the 123rd minute, just in the nick of time – and Chelsea were



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on their way to Wembley for the final. Although they would lose there to Arsenal a month later, Fran's reputation remained intact, as a prolific goal scorer who was also a last-minute game threat.

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'Aaagh!' Fran cried out as a sharp pain shot through her knee and she fell to the ground.

She'd just collided with a Liverpool Ladies defender at Chelsea's home ground in a 50-50 challenge. They were only fifteen minutes into the game and the pressure was on. Liverpool's Katie Zelem had scored in the first minute. It hadn't taken long for Chelsea to equalise – Karen Carney had scored eight minutes later – but Fran knew the team couldn't afford for her to be out of the game, regardless of the pain she was in.

As she lay there she remembered falling to the ground all those years ago when playing against the Renegades. It made her feel better, despite the pain she was in. When she'd fallen in the mud at the Madejski Stadium, with the boys jeering around her, she never would have predicted she'd end up here.



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What had her teammates said to her then? ‘You’ve got to get back up, you’ve got to play on.’ She must do the same now.

‘Okay,’ Fran told herself, ‘you’re fine. No worries.’

She winced as she got up and limped down the pitch. Gemma looked across at her, concerned. Fran gave her the thumbs up, and then glanced down at her knee again. It was swollen but she would be okay.

All of ten minutes later she scored to put Chelsea in the lead. Her teammates ran over to celebrate with her. By half-time they were 4–1 up.

‘You’ve got this, girls!’ said Emma in the changing room as the delighted team evaluated their play. Fran was happy they were all playing well and getting the goals in. She did her best to focus on that rather than the pain in her knee, which was getting worse.

‘I’m fine, I’m fine!’ she reassured Eni, Gemma and Ji, but they could tell something wasn’t quite right as they looked down at her swollen knee.

‘You might want to get that looked at, Fran. We can play on.’



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‘It’s just a bit of bruising,’ said Fran.

In the sixty-third minute, Fran scored her second goal. Her fellow strikers ran over to celebrate.

‘Wow!’ they all cried. ‘You can even score goals with a bad knee! You’re amazing, Fran!’

She grinned through the pain. She’d netted four times in the last three matches. She wasn’t about to slow down now. Chelsea went on to win 6–3. As the team celebrated Fran continued to ignore the pain in her knee. She was determined to carry on playing that season.

## CHAPTER 24

# RECOVERY

‘Yum – they smell delicious!’ Fran called out.

Gemma was cooking up burritos in the flat they shared together, located close to the Chelsea training ground at Cobham. Fran enjoyed being close to her work, but it also meant she could drive to her family and Harriet back in Reading easily.

‘Ow!’ Fran cried out in pain as she attempted to get up off the sofa and walk across to the kitchen.

‘Okay,’ said Gemma, with a stern look on her face. ‘Enough is enough, Fran. You can barely walk! You’ve got to go and get that knee properly looked at.’

Fran finally relented. She was still playing in games

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and scoring goals, but she knew she couldn't carry on like this.

In the medical room at Chelsea, Fran waited for the scan results. The physio looked at her gravely.

'You should not have continued playing on it, Fran. Even you aren't a superhero.'

Fran's heart sank and she suddenly suspected the worst. Visions of her watching her England teammates play Euro 2017, while she was stuck on a sofa, fell into her mind.

'Oh no! How bad is it?'

'Your knee's fractured but the good news is you won't need surgery. Just plenty of rest and rehab. You are very lucky. Don't ever take this risk again. If something hurts that bad, there's something wrong.'

Fran felt the urge to giggle. 'I've been playing with a fractured knee?'

'Hmm,' the consultant replied. 'Maybe you are a superhero.'

Fran heaved a sigh of relief. She had been lucky that time.

She felt upbeat for the first few weeks. She knew

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she'd soon bounce back from this and be ready for training for the Euros. She went to Cobham every day for rehab and thanked her lucky stars she had access to their state-of-the-art facilities and the best team physios. For the first few weeks it felt quite fun and relaxing. She got to know the male Chelsea team better too, and became friends with players César Azpilicueta and David Luiz. She made light of her injury whenever she could, as she knew staying upbeat and seeing the funny side would help her heal.

'I feel like I'm on a spa break!' she called out to César and David as they walked past her in the hydrotherapy pool. 'I'm booked into ultrasound treatment and magnetic therapy next!' But as her weeks of convalescence turned into months, she became frustrated that her knee wasn't healing faster.

For all her hard work with the physios, she had suffered setbacks. There was deep internal bruising, which would take a long time to get better. She wasn't able to train in the gym either, which she really missed. More than anything she hated not



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playing. As supportive as her teammates were, she felt frustrated sitting on the sidelines watching them train.

She turned to Gemma in despair. ‘When will it heal?’

Gemma gave her a hug. ‘Not knowing must be really difficult. Let’s get a dog. I think you need another friend around.’

As soon as Fran set eyes on the little cockapoodle that Gemma brought home she was smitten.

‘Aaw! He’s adorable!’

She looked into his big brown eyes and ruffled his black and brown fur. ‘I’m calling him Cody!’

Fran took her little companion with her everywhere – to rehab, training and back to her family in Reading. She found that looking after him and taking him for walks every day lifted her spirits.

‘Great idea, Gemma, thanks. He’s really given me something else to focus on.’

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Almost a year later, after her injury, England manager Mark Sampson named her as part of his squad for the

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Euro 2017 championships. She was only just back in training but this announcement spurred her on to do well in the spring series.

‘Thank you, Mark! Thank you for believing in me again!’

‘Always!’ he replied.

‘I’ll prove to you I’m worth it.’

‘I know you will. But please go easy on yourself. Make sure you’re 100 per cent before this tournament. There’s no point risking another muscle injury.’

‘I know, Mark – thank you!’

