

MATT AND TOM OLDFIELD

ULTIMATE
FOOTBALL HEROES

KANE

FROM THE PLAYGROUND
TO THE PITCH



CHAPTER 1

ENGLAND HERO

Thursday, 5 October 2017

In the Wembley tunnel, Harry closed his eyes and soaked up the amazing atmosphere. He was back at the home of football, the stadium where he had first achieved his childhood dream of playing for England. 19 March 2015, England vs Lithuania – he remembered that game like it was yesterday. He had scored that day and now, with England facing Slovenia, he needed to do it again. As England’s captain and Number 9, it was his job to shoot them to the 2018 World Cup.

‘Come on, lads!’ Harry called out to his teammates behind him: friends like Joe Hart, Kyle Walker and



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Eric Dier. It was a real honour to be their leader. With a victory over Slovenia, they would all be on their way to the biggest tournament of their lives in Russia.

Harry looked down at the young mascot by his side and smiled at him. ‘Right, let’s do this!’

As the two of them led the England team out onto the pitch, the fans clapped and cheered. Harry didn’t look up at the thousands of faces and flags; instead, he looked down at the grass in front of him. He was totally focused on his task: scoring goals and beating Slovenia.

‘If you get a chance, test the keeper,’ Harry said to his partners in attack, Raheem Sterling and Marcus Rashford, before kick-off. ‘I’ll be there for the rebound!’

Harry’s new Premiership season with Tottenham Hotspur had not begun well in August, but by September he was back to his lethal best. That month alone, he scored an incredible thirteen goals, including two goals for England against Malta. He could score every type of goal – tap-ins, headers, one-



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on-ones, long-range shots, penalties, even free kicks. That's what made him such a dangerous striker.

With Slovenia defending well, Harry didn't get many chances in the first half. He got in good positions but the final ball never arrived.

'There's no need to panic yet,' Harry told his teammates in the dressing room. He really didn't want a repeat of England's terrible performance against Iceland at Euro 2016. That match still haunted him. 'We're good enough to win this by playing our natural game. Be patient!'

As Ryan Bertrand dribbled down the left wing, Harry sprinted towards the six-yard box. Ryan's cross didn't reach him but the ball fell to Raheem instead. His shot was going in until a defender deflected it wide.

'Unlucky!' Harry shouted, putting his hands on his head. 'Keep going, we're going to score!'

Without this kind of strong self-belief, Harry would never have made it to the top of European football. There had been lots of setbacks along the way: rejections, disappointments and bad form. But



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every time, Harry bounced back with crucial goals at crucial moments. That's what made him such a superstar.

A matter of seconds later, a rebound fell to him on the edge of the penalty area. Surely, this was his moment. He pulled back his left foot and curled a powerful shot towards the bottom corner. The fans were already up on their feet, ready to celebrate. Harry never missed... but this time he did. The ball flew just wide of the post. Harry couldn't believe it. He looked up at the sky and sighed.

On the sideline, England manager Gareth Southgate cheered his team on. 'That's much better – the goal is coming, lads!'

But after ninety minutes, the goal still hadn't come. The fourth official raised his board: eight minutes of injury time.

'It's not over yet, boys!' Harry shouted, to inspire his teammates.

The Slovenian goalkeeper tried to throw the ball out to his left-back but Kyle got there first. Straight away, Harry was on the move from the back post



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It was yet another moment that Harry would never forget. Against the odds, he was making his childhood dreams come true. He was the star striker for Tottenham, the club that he had supported all his life. And now, like his hero David Beckham, he was the captain of England.

Harry had never given up, even when it looked like he wouldn't make it as a professional footballer. With the support of his family and his coaches, and lots of hard work and dedication, he had proved everyone wrong to become a world-class goal machine.

It had been an incredible journey from Walthamstow to Wembley, and Harry was only just getting started.



CHAPTER 2

ALWAYS KICKING

‘Mum!’ Charlie shouted, stamping his feet.

Kim sighed and put her magazine down. ‘What’s happened now?’

‘I spent ages building a Lego tower and Harry just kicked it over,’ her older son answered. ‘That was *my* tower!’

‘I’m sorry, darling, but I’m sure Harry didn’t mean it. Your brother doesn’t know what he’s doing with his little feet yet.’

Harry was nearly two years old and he was always on the move around their house in Walthamstow, North London. He had a few bumps on his head but it was his legs that caused the most trouble. Everywhere he went, they never stopped kicking.



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Kim wasn't surprised, though.

'Do you remember before your brother was born when he was still in my tummy?' she asked Charlie as she lifted Harry up onto the sofa. Charlie didn't reply; he was busy building a new tower. 'He was always kicking, even back then, wasn't he? I didn't get a good night's sleep for months!'

Kim held Harry up in the air to give his legs room to swing. 'No, you don't like letting me sleep, do you?' He smiled and wiggled his hands and feet. 'I knew you'd be a boy; there was no doubt about that. I told your Daddy that you were going to be sporty and do you know what he said? He said, "Great, he'll play for TOTTENHAM!"'

Harry's smile grew wider when he heard the name of their local football club. It was a word that his dad, Pat, said so often that it had become his favourite word. The Kane family lived only five miles away from Tottenham's stadium, White Hart Lane.

'Wow, you really love that idea, don't you!' Kim laughed. 'Well, your Grandad Eric was a good footballer in his day. Maybe you'll get his talent,



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rather than your Dad's. Bless him, he always says that bad injuries ruined his career but I think it was his bad first touch!

It was a bright, sunny afternoon and so Kim took her two sons out to the local park. Hopefully, after a few hours of open space and fresh air, Charlie and Harry would sleep well that night, and so would their mum. Once they found a shady spot on the grass, Kim lay down the picnic rug and lifted Harry out of the pushchair.

'Charlie, you've got to stay where I can see you!' she called out as he chased after a squirrel.

After doing a few laps of the rug, Harry sat down and looked around him. He saw leaves and twigs and insects. He saw huge trees above him and patches of blue sky in between. Then his eyes fixed on the exciting scene in front of him. A group of kids were playing football with jumpers for goalposts. That looked like fun. He stood up and went over to explore.

'Harry, stop!' Kim shouted. She chased after her son and scooped him up just before he reached the other kids' football game. In her arms, Harry kept



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watching and his legs kept moving. He was desperate to kick the ball.

‘Not today, darling,’ his mum said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. ‘But soon, I promise!’

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‘So, how was your day?’ Pat asked, as they all ate dinner together. After a long day’s work at the garage, he loved to come home to his happy family.

Charlie could now feed himself like a grown-up but Harry still needed a high chair and some help. Even with Pat holding the spoon, Harry got strawberry yoghurt all over his hands and face.

‘I built an awesome tower but Harry broke it with his silly little feet,’ Charlie told his dad. He was looking for sympathy, but Pat had other ideas.

‘Good, your brother’s getting ready for his big Tottenham career! Football runs in the family, you know. Just ask your Grandad – I was one of Ireland’s best young players but sadly...’

Kim rolled her eyes. Not again! She decided not to mention Harry’s kicking in the park. It would only get her husband’s hopes up even more.



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Normally, Harry celebrated with the Klinsmann dive but his Spurs shirt was white and he couldn't make his White Hart Lane debut wearing a muddy shirt! So instead, he jumped up and pumped his fist. He could tell that it was going to be a very good day.

After lunch, it was finally time for them to leave.

'Have you got your hats?' Kim asked at the front door.

Harry nodded.

'Gloves?'

Harry nodded.

'Good, stay close to your dad and have a great time!'

They were off! Harry couldn't wait to get to White Hart Lane. On the bus, he imagined the people, the noise, the goals. As they crossed through the Walthamstow reservoirs, Charlie had a thought.

'Dad, have you got the tickets?'

There was panic on Pat's face as he checked all of his pockets, once and then twice. 'Oh dear,' he muttered.



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Harry's face dropped with disappointment. How had his dad forgotten the tickets? Why hadn't he checked before they left?

Suddenly, a smile spread across Pat's face, and he held up the tickets. 'Just kidding!' he cheered.

'Dad, don't scare us like that!' Harry shouted. He didn't find the joke funny at all.

When they got off the bus, the stadium was right there in front of them. Harry stood there looking up, his mouth wide open. It was even bigger than he'd expected.

'Come on, let's go in and find our seats!' his dad said. 'Don't let go of my hand, okay? If you get lost, Mum won't ever let us come back.'

Harry held on tightly as they moved through the crowds towards the turnstile, on their way to their seats. There were so many people everywhere and so much to see and hear.

'Get today's match programme here!' the sellers shouted.

Some Tottenham fans talked about their players in between bites of burgers and hot dogs. Other



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Tottenham fans were already singing songs even before they entered the stadium. It was all so exciting.

Once they were through the turnstile, Harry could see a square of green in the distance. His eyes lit up – the pitch! As they got closer, he couldn't believe the size of it. How did the players keep running from box to box for ninety minutes? It looked impossible.

'Look, there's Ginola!' Charlie shouted, pointing down at the players warming up. 'And there's Klinsmann!'

Harry stood up on his seat to get a better view. He was in the same stadium as his heroes; it didn't get any better than that.

Tottenham, Tottenham!

As the players ran out of the tunnel for the start of the game, the noise grew even louder. Spurs needed a win to stay out of the relegation zone. After a few minutes, Ginola got the ball on the left wing.

'Come on!' the Tottenham fans cheered, rising to their feet.

Ginola curled a brilliant cross into the penalty area. Harry held his breath as Klinsmann stretched to reach it...



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CHAPTER 1

TREBLE TIME

‘Hey, how’s it going?’ Lionel said, giving his fellow Argentinian Carlos Tevez a big hug as they waited in the tunnel.

Lionel was about to play in the 2014–15 Champions League final but he wasn’t nervous at all. It was the third time he had played in the final with Barcelona and he had won both times before. He was a born winner and he was the best player in the world. So he felt very confident as he walked out on to the pitch at the Olympiastadion in Berlin to face Italian giants Juventus.

Lionel looked up into the stands and saw the huge wall of red and blue, or ‘*azulgrana*’ as they called it



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in Spanish – the colours representing Barcelona, one of the world’s biggest clubs and Lionel’s home since the age of thirteen. He had played in some amazing Barcelona teams but this was perhaps the best team of all. They had already won the Spanish League and the Spanish Cup – now could they win the Champions League to make it an incredible Treble?

‘Yes we can!’ they cheered together.

Lionel’s old friends Gerard Piqué and Javier Mascherano were the rocks in defence, Andrés Iniesta and Xavi controlled the midfield, while ‘MSN’ scored the goals up front. That’s what the media were calling the world’s best ever strikeforce – Lionel Messi, the Uruguayan Luis Suárez, and the Brazilian Neymar. Together, they had scored 120 goals already, with one big game left to play.

‘Come on!’ Lionel shouted as they waited for kick-off. When he was younger, he was too shy to speak to his teammates but he was twenty-seven now and one of their leaders.

Within four minutes, Neymar passed to Andrés, who passed to Ivan Rakitić, who scored. Barcelona



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were 1-0 up. They made everything look so easy with their quick, passing football, and Lionel hadn't even been involved – but he knew how important teamwork was.

'Great work!' he shouted to Ivan. Even he couldn't do everything on his own.

Playing just behind Neymar and Luis, Lionel kept searching for the space to work his magic. He was known as The Flea, buzzing around everywhere and terrorising his opponents. With his close control, quick feet and footballing brain, he only ever needed one second. Especially in his favourite spot: just outside the penalty area on the right side, he could dribble with his amazing left foot. Lionel loved scoring goals but he loved creating goals too – there was nothing he couldn't do.

Barcelona were playing well but in the second half, Juventus equalised. Just when his team needed him most, Lionel came alive. He passed to Neymar, who flicked it back to Lionel, who passed to Luis, who passed back to Lionel. His shot went wide but 'MSN' were looking dangerous.



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‘If we keep this up, we’ll score again!’ Lionel told the others.

Minutes later, he dribbled forward again. The defender tried to tackle him but Lionel was too quick and too skilful. When he grabbed his shirt, Lionel shrugged him off. He wasn’t the biggest footballer but he had worked hard to build up his strength.

As Lionel flew towards goal, Neymar made a run to make space for him. On the edge of the penalty area, Lionel decided to shoot. The ball flew straight at the goalkeeper but it swerved and dipped and he couldn’t hold on to it. Luis sprinted towards the ball and smashed it into the net. 2-1!

As Luis jumped the advertising board, Lionel and Neymar were right behind him. It was yet another ‘MSN’ goal and Barcelona were one step closer to another Champions League trophy.

‘There’s plenty of time to score another!’ Neymar said with a big smile on his face. Their favourite form of defence was attack.

In injury time, a clearance fell to Lionel. He looked up and saw his Brazilian teammate sprinting forward.



Stretching out his leg, he played a perfect through-ball. Neymar and Luis had a two-on-one against the Juventus centre-back. Neymar passed to Luis and as the defender moved across, Luis passed it back to Neymar. His shot rocketed into the bottom corner. 3-1! Barcelona were the Champions of Europe.

At the final whistle, Lionel hugged Andrés and Xavi. Together, they had conquered the football world again. He was so grateful to his amazing teammates. Their clever passes always arrived at his feet, no matter where he was on the pitch.

‘After my injuries last year, some people thought that my best days were over,’ Lionel said. ‘They were so wrong!’

In the 2014/15 season he had helped Barcelona win the Treble with 58 goals and 25 assists in only 57 games. He was very proud of his return to form.

As Xavi lifted the trophy into the air, Lionel was right at the centre of the celebrations. He hadn’t scored a goal in the final this time round, but he had still played a very important role.

‘Thiago!’ Lionel called to his three-year-old son,



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who was wearing a Barcelona shirt with '10 MESSI' on the back. He kissed his girlfriend Antonella and carried Thiago around the pitch to wave to the fans. His little family meant the world to him.

'Look, there's your Grandpa and Grandma!' Lionel said to Thiago, pointing to Jorge and Celia in the crowd.

Without the love and support of his parents, Lionel wouldn't have made the brave move from Argentina to Spain to chase his dream of playing professional football. He had arrived at Barcelona as a tiny teenager with amazing natural talent but some of his coaches had their doubts. Did he really have the strength and desire to make it to the very top?

Nearly fifteen years later, the answer was there in Lionel's trophy cabinet: seven La Liga titles, four Champions League trophies, four FIFA Ballon d'Or trophies and one Olympic Gold Medal. He was the best player in the world but The Flea had plenty more magic up his sleeve.



CHAPTER 2

JORGE'S DREAM

Jorge Messi stood on his doorstep and slowly rocked his newborn son in his arms. It was a warm, sunny afternoon in Argentina and Jorge had stories to share with him.

‘Welcome to La Bajada, Lionel,’ he said quietly. ‘This will always be your home. You’ll love it here – it’s a nice and peaceful community. The people are very friendly and the kids play freely in the streets. Plus, all of your family live nearby: your grandparents, your aunts and uncles, and your cousins too.’

‘I built this house myself with my father – your grandfather, Eusebio. He worked as a builder and he taught me all of his skills. The house is nothing special



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but it will do for now, until your brothers Rodrigo and Matías want their own bedrooms, and then so will you!

‘What else shall I tell you? Your great-grandparents came to Argentina from Italy and Spain a long time ago. So our culture is a real mix of Europe and South America. And luckily for you, your grandmother Celia makes the best pasta dishes in the world!

‘Just before you were born, we nearly moved to Australia. There are lots of good jobs there but in the end, we couldn’t bear to leave our family behind. It’s strange to think that you might have grown up speaking English as well as Spanish, and you might have become a surfer or a cricketer! But don’t worry, you’re an Argentinian and so you will be a footballer instead.

‘As you’ll soon find out, this whole country is football-mad. When Diego Maradona lifted the World Cup for Argentina last summer, the party went on for weeks! And Rosario is a particularly special place. So many great Argentinian footballers have come from this city. Maybe you will be the next!’

Celia tiptoed into the room. ‘Is he asleep yet?’ she whispered.



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Jorge nodded and gave a big thumbs-up. When his wife left the room, he continued.

‘Let me tell you the story about your name. I’m sure you’ll hear it many times during your life! Your mum loved “Leonel” with two “e”s and I liked it too. But as I went to register your name, I thought about how people would shorten it. I really don’t like “Leo” – don’t ask me to explain why!

‘So I asked for a list of other names and I found the English spelling – “Lionel”, with an “i” instead of an “e”. “Lio” – that sounds much better to me. When I got home and told her, your mum was so angry with me! I don’t think she’ll let me make a decision like that ever again. But soon she’ll love your name just as much as me. It’s a special name for a special boy. Now let’s get back to football. I’m afraid you won’t have a choice about what team you support – our family are all “Lepers”, fans of the best local team, Newell’s Old Boys. When I was younger, I played for their youth team. I was a pretty good central midfielder but then I had to go away for military service and when I returned, I married your mum



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and then Rodrigo and Matías were born. I didn't have time to play at a high level anymore – I needed to earn money to feed my growing family.

'So I got a good job as a factory manager but I still play football every now and again. Soon, you'll come and watch me play and hopefully you'll be proud of your dad. One of you will play for Newell's Old Boys – I'm sure of it! That was my dream and now I'm passing it on to my sons.'

Jorge pointed across the road to a small grassy area.

'For the first few years, that will be your stadium. You'll have your first football battles there with your brothers and your friends. You'll get your first cuts and bruises and you'll score your first goals. Then, you'll move on to the youth football pitches at Newell's and when you're ready, you'll make your debut at their stadium, *El Coloso del Parque*. You'll become a local legend – no pressure!

'There is no better feeling in the world than hearing thousands of fans chanting your name. Everyone wants to be a hero. If you work hard, you can achieve any goals. But first, get some sleep!'



CHAPTER 3

FIRST STEPS

When he was nine months old, Lionel took his first, wobbly steps.

‘That’s it, steady now!’ Celia cheered as she waited to catch him if he fell.

Lionel giggled and moved his little legs faster. He was free!

Once he was a confident walker, the family had to keep a very close eye on him. In La Bajada, people always left their front doors open and one day, he walked right out into the street.

‘Lionel, stop!’ Jorge shouted as he chased after him. ‘It’s dangerous!’

There wasn’t usually much traffic in the

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neighbourhood but as Lionel stepped out, a boy rushed past on a bicycle and knocked him over. After the shock of the fall, he cried and cried.

‘You’re safe, son,’ Jorge kept saying, hugging Lionel tight. ‘You gave us quite a scare there. Please promise me you won’t do that again!’

On his first birthday, Lionel got his first Newell’s Old Boys kit. It was so big for him that it looked like a dress.

‘You’re a proper fan now!’ Jorge told him with a big smile on his face. They took photos for the family collection.

Lionel wore the red-and-black shirt every day and he became upset when it had to be washed. Jorge was delighted to see his son’s growing interest in football.

‘He’ll be playing with Rodrigo and Matías in no time!’ Jorge told his wife excitedly.

‘Maybe that will tire him out a bit,’ Celia replied with a sigh. ‘He never stops running around at the moment.’

When his brothers went out to play, Lionel



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followed behind with his grandmother. He loved watching football but he really wanted to be playing. That was the next step.

On his third birthday, Lionel got the best present ever – a brand new football.

‘Amazing, thanks!’ he shouted out, giving his parents big hugs. ‘It’s beautiful!’

‘And it’s about as big as you!’ Rodrigo joked. It was a size 5 and Lionel could barely hold it in his little hands.

‘Come on, let’s go and have a kickabout!’ Jorge cheered and they all crossed the road to play.

The ball came up above Lionel’s knee but he controlled it well and, with light touches, he dribbled towards goal. There was a very serious look on his face as he kicked it with all his power. Jorge was always going to let it in but the ball went right in the corner.

‘Wow, you’re a natural!’ Matías cheered as they lifted Lionel up into the air to celebrate his first goal.

The ball went everywhere with Lionel: sometimes in his arms but usually at his feet. He even slept with



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it in his bed. His brothers liked to tease him – ‘How’s your best friend?’ – but he didn’t care. He was getting better and better.

When Lionel turned four, his mum finally let him go and play with his brothers in their local matches.

‘Look after him!’ Celia shouted to Rodrigo and Matías as they rushed out of the house.

From the window of their house, she kept an eye on her youngest son but she didn’t need to worry. Lionel ran and ran, snapping at defenders’ heels like an excited puppy. When he got the ball, he kept it simple with neat passes to his new teammates. He didn’t want them to think he was a show-off.

‘You’re doing well! Now try one of your dribbles,’ Matías suggested.

Lionel waited patiently until he spotted a gap in the defence. Then with a burst of speed, he dribbled between two defenders and passed it to his teammate Javier to score.

‘Great work, Titch!’ Javier laughed. Lionel didn’t really like his new nickname but it was nice to have one. It added to his growing confidence on the pitch.



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Lionel was much smaller and younger than his opponents but they still couldn't get the ball off him. It was as if it was glued to his foot. Eventually, they got frustrated and kicked him.

Owwwwwww!

If it was really painful, Lionel did sometimes cry but he always got back up and carried on.

'How's the ankle?' Rodrigo asked him. He was following his mum's orders. 'Do you want to rest it for a bit?

Lionel shook his head. 'No, it's fine. I want to win!'

He loved the challenge of playing against older kids, but playing with his own friends was fun too. He didn't need to worry so much about getting hurt and it was nice to escape from his brothers for a bit. The pitch became a magical space for their fun football adventures.

'What shall we play today?' Lionel asked the other players. 'A penalty shoot-out? World Cup Doubles? Three versus three?'

'How about the five of us versus you?!' Walter suggested with a big grin on his face.



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‘No, I’d still win!’ Lionel laughed.

‘Not if we tie your feet together!’ Diego argued.

Once they became hungry, most of his friends headed home for dinner but Lionel always stayed behind to practise. His mum didn’t have far to go to find him.

‘I won’t tell you again – the food is getting cold,’ Celia shouted from the doorstep. ‘If you’re not at the table in one minute, I’ll give your dinner to Matías!’

‘Coming!’ Lionel replied.



CHAPTER 4

GRANDOLI

‘When can I join Grandoli?’ Lionel asked Jorge. If he asked enough times, surely his dad would give in and let him play. That was his big plan.

Grandoli Football Club played their matches at the end of the road that the Messi family lived on. The pitch was poor, with stones and bits of glass in amongst the mud. The teams only played in the evenings because a school used the pitch during the day, and the lighting wasn’t good at all. But at least Grandoli was a proper team with a proper kit. And Rodrigo and Matías already played there.

‘Okay, I’ll take you to training tomorrow,’ Jorge said eventually when his youngest son turned five.



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Lionel jumped into the air. His time had come. He couldn't wait for 'baby football', the seven-a-side game that young Argentinians played until they turned eleven. All of his training on the pitch next to his house would finally be put to the test.

'Thanks Dad, I'm ready for this!'

Salvador Aparicio was the coach of Lionel's age group, the team all born in 1987. He had seen Lionel at Grandoli before, when the boy had watched his older brothers play, but it was only as he practiced keepy-uppies before training in his massive red-and-white shirt that Salvador realised just how small he was. Most of his new teammates towered over him.

'The most skilful players are often very small,' the coach told himself. 'And he's got plenty of time to grow!'

Salvador liked his players to have fun, both in training and in matches. It was very important for youngsters to enjoy their football and not get too stressed about fitness and tactics.

'Right kids – let's start with a few *rondos*!'

Rondos were the South American version of piggy



in the middle. It was an entertaining way for the team to improve their control, balance and passing. Lionel was already brilliant at all three, and after fifteen minutes, he still hadn't made any mistakes.

'Wow, his touch is incredible!' Salvador said to one of the other coaches.

In the game at the end of training, Lionel wasn't a selfish show-off – that wasn't his style. He had a lot of the ball but he dribbled and passed patiently, waiting for the right opportunity to create a goal. In thirty minutes of football, he didn't lose possession once and he scored ten goals.

'That kid's got a very special gift,' Salvador told Lionel's grandmother, Celia. He loved discovering great new talents and this new player was the best he'd ever seen.

'I know – you can thank us later!' she replied.
'Lionel, come on, it's time to go home now!'

Lionel sighed and dragged himself away from his own shooting exercises. He was the last one left on the pitch but he could have stayed out there for hours. If he didn't practise, he wouldn't become perfect.

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The team trained three times a week and then played matches every Saturday. It was a lot of football but it was never enough for Lionel. He was always hungry for more. At Las Heras Primary School, he sat in class waiting for the bell to ring. In between each lesson, they had a fifteen-minute break.

‘Come on, let’s go and play!’ he yelled as they all ran to get the football.

Lionel was the best footballer and therefore the leader of the gang. In lessons, he was a quiet boy but with a football at his feet, he was a completely different character. No-one could get it off him as he danced around the playground. At first it was amazing to watch but soon, the other boys got frustrated and sometimes they complained to the teacher.

‘Miss, Titch won’t pass the ball!’

‘What do you want me to do?’ she replied, smiling. ‘I can’t tackle him either!’

On weekdays, Lionel’s grandmother, Celia, picked him up from school, took him home for a biscuit and a glass of juice, and then took him to football. It



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was a routine that they both loved and soon Lionel's younger cousin, Emanuel, joined them too.

'With you in goal and me in attack, no-one will be able to beat us!' Lionel said happily.

It was true. The more Lionel played, the better he became, and Grandoli hardly lost a game. Sometimes, he dribbled around the whole team to score. Defenders tried everything to stop him – kicking him, pushing him, elbowing him, and pulling his shirt – but it was no use.

'Keep going, kid!' Salvador told Lionel if his head ever dropped. He didn't have much to teach his superstar. He just encouraged him to play his natural, beautiful game.

With wondergoal after wondergoal, big crowds started to come and watch Lionel play. Sometimes, even his opponents clapped at his skills. People called him 'the next Maradona'.

Celia was a very proud grandparent as she cheered from the sidelines:

'Great save, Emanuel!'

'Referee – that should have been a penalty!'



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‘Pass it to Lionel – he’ll score!’

Lionel was only six years old but he took football very seriously. Before every match, he prepared his boots carefully. He washed them with water, and then he cleaned them with a cloth and a brush until they sparkled.

‘You’re not a professional yet!’ Matías joked.

‘No, not *yet!*’ Lionel replied with a cheeky grin. It was only a matter of time.



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CHAPTER 1

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

On 14 July 2018, Kylian sent a message to his millions of social media followers, from Russia with love: ‘Happy French national day everyone. Let’s hope the party continues until tomorrow night!’

‘Tomorrow night’ – 15 July – the French national team would be playing in the World Cup final at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow. It was the most important football match on the planet and Kylian’s country was counting on him.

So far, he hadn’t let them down at all. In fact, Kylian had been France’s speedy superstar, scoring the winning goal against Denmark, and then two more in an amazing man-of-the-match performance



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against Argentina. That all made him the nation's best 'Number 10' since Zinedine Zidane back in 1998.

That was the year that France last won the World Cup.

That was also the year that Kylian was born.

Thanks to their new young superstar, '*Les Bleus*' were now the favourites to lift the famous golden trophy again. They had already beaten Lionel Messi's Argentina, Luis Suárez's Uruguay in the quarter-finals, and Eden Hazard's Belgium in the semi-finals. Now, the only nation standing in their way was Luka Modrić's Croatia.

'You've done so well to get this far,' the France manager, Didier Deschamps, told them as kick-off approached and the nerves began to jangle. 'Now, you just need to go out there and finish off the job!'

A massive 'Yeah!' echoed around the room. It was one big team effort, from captain Hugo Lloris in goal through to Kylian, Antoine Griezmann and Olivier Giroud in attack. Everyone worked hard and everyone worked together.

By the way, those jangling nerves didn't



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belong to Kylian. No way, he was the coolest character around! He never let anything faze him. When he was younger, he hadn't just hoped to play in a World Cup final; he had expected it. It was all part of his killer plan to conquer the football world.

Out on the pitch for the final in Moscow, Kylian sang the words of the French national anthem with a big smile on his face. As a four-year-old, some people had laughed at his ambitious dreams. Well, they definitely weren't laughing now.

'Right, let's do this!' Paul Pogba clapped and cheered as they took up their positions. His partnership with Kylian would be key for France. Whenever Paul got the ball in midfield, he would look to find his pacy teammate with a perfect pass.

Kylian's first action of the final, however, was in defence. He rushed back quickly to block a Croatia cross.

'Well done!' France's centre-back Samuel Umtiti shouted.

Once that was done, it was all about attacking.



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Even in a World Cup final, Kylian wasn't afraid to try his tricks and flicks. They didn't always work but it was worth the risk.

It was an end-to-end first half, full of exciting action. First, Antoine curled in a dangerous free kick and Mario Mandžukić headed the ball into his own net. 1–0 to France! Kylian punched the air – what a start!

Ivan Perišić equalised for Croatia but then he handballed it in his own box. Penalty! Antoine stepped up... and scored – 2–1 to France!

The players were happy to hear the half-time whistle blow. They needed a break to breathe and regroup. Although France were winning, they still had work to do if they wanted to become World Champions again.

'We need to calm things down and take control of the game,' Deschamps told his players. 'Stay smart out there!'

Kylian listened carefully to his manager's message. He needed to relax and play to his strengths – his skill but also his speed. This was his chance to go



down in World Cup history:

Pelé in 1958,

Diego Maradona in 1986,

Zidane in 1998,

Ronaldo in 2002,

Kylian in 2018?

In the second half, France's superstars shone much more brightly. Kylian collected Paul's long pass and sprinted straight past the Croatia centre-back.

Was he about to score in his first World Cup final?

No, the keeper came out to make a good save.

'Ohhhh!' the supporters groaned in disappointment.

But a few minutes later, Paul and Kylian linked up again. From wide on the right wing, Kylian dribbled towards goal. Uh oh, the Croatia left-back was in big trouble.

With a stepover and a little hop, Kylian cut inside towards goal but in a flash, he fooled the defender with another quick change of direction.

'Go on!' the France fans urged their exciting young hero.

What next? Kylian still had two defenders in front



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a little jump, he planted his feet, folded his arms across his chest, and tried to look as cool as he could. That last part was really hard because he had just scored in a World Cup final!

The next thirty minutes ticked by very slowly but eventually, the game was over. France 4 Croatia 2 – they were the 2018 World Champions!

Allez Les Bleus! Allez Les Bleus! Allez Les Bleus!

Kylian used the last of his energy to race around the pitch, handing out hugs to everyone he saw: his sad opponents, his happy teammates, his manager, EVERYONE! In that amazing moment, he would have hugged every single French person in the world if he could. Instead, he blew kisses at the cameras. From Russia with love!

And Kylian's incredible night wasn't over yet. Wearing his country's flag around his waist, he walked up on stage to collect the tournament's Best Young Player award from Emmanuel Macron.

'Thank you, you're a national hero now!' the French President told him proudly.

'My pleasure, Sir!' Kylian replied.



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Would his smile ever fade? Certainly not while he had a World Cup winners' medal around his neck and the beautiful World Cup trophy in his hands. He didn't ever want to let go. Kylian kissed it and raised it high into the Moscow night sky.

'Hurray!' the fans cheered for him.

At the age of nineteen, Kylian was already living out his wildest dreams. The boy from Bondy had become a World Cup winner and football's next great superstar.



CHAPTER 2

A SPORTY FAMILY IN A SPORTY SUBURB

‘What if he doesn’t like sports?’ Wilfried Mbappé whispered to his wife, Fayza Lamari, as they watched their new-born son, Kylian, sleeping peacefully in his cot. He was a man who loved to laugh but at that moment, he had a worried look on his face.

Fayza smiled and spoke softly so as not to wake the baby. ‘Does it really matter? Kylian can do whatever he wants to do, and we’re going to love him no matter what!’

Her husband nodded but she could still see the frown lines on his forehead.

‘Relax, Wilfried, he’s our son, so of course he’s going to LOVE sports!’

With parents like his, Kylian was always destined



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to be a sporting superstar.

Wilfried's favourite sport was football. When he was younger, he had moved to France from Cameroon in order to find a good job. As well as that, Wilfried had also been lucky enough to find the two loves of his life – his wife, Fayza, and his local football club, AS Bondy. His playing days were now over, but he had become a youth team coach instead.

Fayza's favourite sport was handball. She was a star player for AS Bondy in France's top division. Ever since she was a kid, Fayza had been racing up and down the right wing, competing fiercely with her rivals. She couldn't wait to get back out on the court, now that Kylian was born.

'No-one messes with your mum!' Wilfried always told his sons proudly.

Not only were the Mbappés a very sporty family, but they also lived in a very sporty suburb of Paris. Over the years, so many successful athletes, basketball players and footballers had grown up in Bondy. There was top talent on display wherever



you turned!

The sports club, AS Bondy, was at the heart of the local community, right in the middle of all the shops and tower blocks. Growing up, Kylian could see the local stadium from the windows of their apartment. It was an inspiring sight.

AS Bondy was a place where people from lots of different French-speaking backgrounds – Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Haiti, Togo, Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast – could come together and enjoy themselves. That was really important because life wasn't easy for the local people. They had to work long hours in order to feed their families and strive towards a brighter future.

For the young people of Bondy, the sports club was particularly special. It was their home away from home, where they could develop their skills, while at the same time staying out of trouble. Coaches like Wilfried taught them three simple rules to live by:

- 1) Respect each other.
- 2) Stay humble.
- 3) Love sport.

At AS Bondy, youngsters could forget about their



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problems and just focus on their sporting dreams.

In years to come, the local kids would look up at a big mural showing Kylian's face under the words, 'Bondy: Ville Des Possibles'. No, it wasn't the wealthiest part of Paris, but it was a 'City of Possibilities' where, with hard work and dedication, you could achieve your dreams.

So, what was Kylian's sporting dream? To play handball like his mother, or football like his father? His adopted older brother, Jirés Kembo Ekoko, was already the star of Wilfried's Under-10s football team. Would Kylian follow in his footsteps?

Or perhaps Kylian would choose to play a different sport...

'He can do whatever he wants to do,' Fayza reminded Wilfried, 'and we're going to love him no matter what!'

Growing up, Kylian enjoyed playing tennis and basketball with his friends, but there was really only one sport for him. To his dad's delight, that sport turned out to be football!



CHAPTER 3

THE LITTLE PRINCE OF BONDY

Little Kylian didn't know the meaning of the word 'slow'. He was a football hero in a hurry.

By the age of two, he was already a familiar face in the AS Bondy dressing room. Just as the players were preparing for the match ahead, a little boy would race in with a football tucked under his arm.

'Look who it is – our mascot, the Little Prince of Bondy!' the club president, Atmane Airouche greeted him. 'You're just in time for the team-talk!'

Even if Wilfried wasn't there with him, Kylian was never any trouble. When the manager was talking, he just sat there quietly next to the Bondy players and listened. Before they went out onto the pitch, they all high-fived him. He was their good luck



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charm.

‘Are we going to win today?’ the captain asked Kylian.

He nodded eagerly. ‘Yeah!’

Kylian would then go out and watch the games with a football at his feet.

By the age of six, Kylian already had his own future all planned out.

‘What do you want to be when you’re older?’ Wilfried asked, recording his son’s reply.

‘I want to be a footballer,’ Kylian said, looking confidently at the video camera. ‘I’m going to play for France and I’m going to play in the World Cup too.’

Fayza tried very hard not to laugh at the serious expression on her son’s young face. He had such amazing ambition! As the French national anthem played, Kylian sang along with his hand on his heart, just like the players he saw on TV.

‘Great, and what club would you like to play for?’
‘Bondy!’

Kylian was already training with the juniors. His coach, Antonio Riccardi, was one of Wilfried and



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Fayza's closest friends, and so he had been kicking balls around with their sons for years. However, this was the first time that he would see Kylian playing a proper match against kids his own age.

'Wow!' was Antonio's response.

He looked so tiny in his baggy green shirt and shorts, but boy, could Kylian play football!

Even during the warm-up, Antonio could see the difference. He was so much better than everyone else. For a young kid, he really seemed to understand the game. Kylian didn't just kick and chase, like the others; he thought about what he wanted to do with the ball, and then did it. All those weekends at Bondy, spent watching and listening to the adults around him... Kylian had been taking everything in.

'Right, let's practise our dribbling!' Antonio called out.

The coach had set up a line of cones for them to weave through before taking a shot at goal. It looked easy but it wasn't. The first four kids either took it too fast or too slow. They either bumped the ball off cone after cone, or crawled their way down the line



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like a sleepy tortoise.

‘At that speed, you’re going to get tackled every time!’ Antonio told them as kindly as he could.

At last, it was Kylian’s turn and he couldn’t wait to show off his skills. He had been working hard on his dribbling at home with his dad and Jirés. It was now time to test himself in front of a bigger audience.

One, two, three, four – as Kylian raced through the cones, the ball stayed stuck to his right foot. His control was so good that he didn’t knock a single one of them.

‘Excellent!’ Antonio called out. ‘Now shoot!’

But by then, Kylian was already rushing over to collect his ball from the back of the net. His shot hit the top-left corner of the net before the goalkeeper had even moved.

Kylian was the standout player in the passing practice too. The touch, the movement, the accuracy – it was like he was a professional already! Antonio was blown away by the Little Prince of Bondy. He had coached a lot of impressive kids in Paris, but



he had never seen a six-year-old with that much footballing talent. Never!

‘Surely he’s too good to play with kids his own age?’ the coach was thinking, and that was before the match at the end of the session had even started.

‘Wow!’ Antonio was soon saying again.

To go with his silky ball skills, Kylian also had electrifying pace. It was a winning combination that the poor Bondy defenders just could not cope with. Every time he got the ball, it was goal-time. ZOOM! Kylian was off, sprinting down the right wing, just like his mum on the handball court. Sometimes, he set up goals for his teammates and sometimes, he scored himself.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6-0!

‘Okay, let’s switch the teams around a bit. Kylian, put on an orange bib!’

6-1, 6-2, 6-3, 6-4, 6-5, 6-6, 6-7, 6-8!

In the end, Antonio had to stop the game early because he didn’t want his players to get too down-hearted. Kylian was simply in a league of his own. He was better, faster and more consistent than

anyone else.

Once practice was over, Antonio went to find Wilfried.

‘I don’t think Kylian should be playing for the Under-7s,’ he explained.

‘Why not?’ Wilfried replied, looking surprised. ‘Did my son play badly today?’

‘NO!’ the coach replied, laughing at the idea. ‘Quite the opposite; he was absolutely incredible! He’s the best I’ve ever seen at that age. The Under-7s league would be a walk in the park for him; he would just get bored. He needs a challenge!’

By the age of eight, Kylian was playing for the Bondy Under-11s, skilling left-backs all game long. He was on a fast track to the top. His killer plan to conquer the football world was going very well indeed.



MATT AND TOM OLDFIELD

ULTIMATE
FOOTBALL HEROES

SALAH

FROM THE PLAYGROUND
TO THE PITCH



CHAPTER 1

EUROPEAN SUPERSTAR

Anfield, 24 April 2018

The atmosphere at Anfield was always amazing but on big European nights, it was extra special. The chorus of the Kop started hours before kick-off and, if Liverpool were to beat Roma, it would go on for days afterwards. The fans sang the old favourites like ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’, and they sang the new favourites too:

Mo Salah, Mo Salah

Running down the wing,

Salah la la la la la la

Egyptian King!

The eyes of the world were on Liverpool’s



SALAH

‘Egyptian King’. Mohamed was in the best form of his life, with forty goals and counting. He had already scored thirty-one in the Premier League and nine in the Champions League. Could he keep shooting his team all the way to the final?

For Mohamed, it was going to be an emotional night, no matter what. First of all, he was playing in his first-ever Champions League semi-final, a moment that he had dreamed about ever since he was an eight-year-old boy. He was following in the footsteps of his heroes like Zinedine Zidane and Francesco Totti.

Mohamed was also playing against his old club. When his big move to Chelsea hadn’t worked out, it was Italian football that saved him. At Fiorentina, and then Roma, he had rediscovered his passion, his confidence, and the path to superstardom. He would always be grateful for that.

Mohamed’s old manager, Luciano Spalletti, had moved on, but lots of his old teammates were still there – Radja Nainggolan, Stephan El Shaarawy, and his old strike partner, Edin Džeko. In the tunnel,



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Mohamed hugged each and every one of them.

‘Good luck,’ he said with a smile, ‘may the best team win!’

Liverpool were far from a one-man team.

Mohamed was one part of ‘The Big Three’, the hottest strikeforce in the world. With Sadio Mané on the left, Roberto Firmino in the middle, and Mohamed on the right, the Reds looked unstoppable. Even Philippe Coutinho’s move to Barcelona hadn’t slowed them down. They had scored five against Porto in the Round of 16 and then five against Manchester City in the quarter-finals too. If the Roma defenders weren’t careful, ‘The Big Three’ would run riot again.

‘Come on lads, let’s win this!’ the Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson shouted as the players took up their positions for kick-off.

Even during his days at Roma, Mohamed had been more of a winger than a striker. With his amazing sprint speed, he would race past defenders and set up chances for Edin. At Liverpool, however, manager Jürgen Klopp had helped turn Mohamed into a



SALAH

proper forward and a goalscoring machine. He still worked hard for his team but he did it higher up the pitch. That way, if a defender made a mistake, he was always ready to pounce.

Liverpool created their first good opening after twenty-seven minutes. One clever flick from Roberto was all it took to set speedy Sadio away. He had Mohamed to his right but Sadio wanted the glory for himself. In the penalty area, he pulled back his left foot and... blazed it over the crossbar!

The Liverpool fans buried their heads in their hands – what a missed opportunity! Two minutes later, another one arrived. Mohamed played a great pass to Roberto, who squared it to Sadio. He hit it first time... high and wide!

Groans rang out around Anfield. They couldn't keep wasting these opportunities! Liverpool needed more composure in front of goal. What they needed was a cool head...

Sadio passed to Roberto, who passed to Mohamed on the right side of the box. With a quick tap of the boot, he shifted the ball onto his lethal left foot. Time



SALAH

second half, he beat Roma's offside trap again and crossed to Sadio for a simple tap-in. 3-0!

They pointed over at Roberto. 'Bobby, it's your turn to score now!'

Mohamed picked the ball up on the right wing and attacked the poor Roma left-back, who backed away in fear. Hadn't Mohamed done enough damage for one day? No! He danced his way through and crossed to Roberto at the back post. 4-0!

Liverpool's 'Big Three' were all on the scoresheet yet again. It was party time at Anfield:

We've got Salah, do do do do do do!

Mané Mané, do do do do do,

And Bobby Firmino,

And we sold Coutinho!

After seventy-five brilliant minutes, Klopp gave his superstar a well-deserved rest. As Mohamed left the pitch, both sets of fans stood up to clap his world-class performance, and the humble hero clapped right back.

At Basel, Mohamed had become a European star; at Liverpool, he had become a European *superstar*.



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With two great goals and two amazing assists, Mohamed had led Liverpool towards the Champions League final, just as he had led his country, Egypt, to the 2018 World Cup.

‘So, just how good *is* Mohamed Salah?’ the TV presenter asked.

Liverpool legend Steven Gerrard smiled and replied: ‘He’s the best player on the planet right now!’

That had always been Mohamed’s dream, ever since he first kicked a football on his local pitch in Nagrig.



CHAPTER 2

NAGRIG

‘Come on!’ Mohamed Salah called out impatiently to his brother. ‘The others will be waiting!’

‘Coming!’ Nasr replied, his voice echoing down the corridor. He quickly pushed his feet into his shoes and slammed the front door behind him.

The Salah brothers didn’t have far to go. Nagrig was a small farming village in Egypt, with only one main dusty street cutting through wide fields of green and yellow. Around that one main dusty street, however, was everything that they needed – their home, their school, the shop, the post office, the café, the community centre and the mosque.

Most importantly of all, tucked in between the



MATT AND TOM OLDFIELD

crumbling blocks of flats and the community centre, was their football pitch. It was the same football pitch that their dad and uncles had played on when they were young boys. The surface was bone dry and bobbly but there was a rusty set of goalposts and plenty of space to play.

‘Hey, wait for me!’ Nasr shouted as he chased after his older brother.

With a loud sigh, Mohamed slowed down to let him catch up. That was their parents’ one condition; the two boys could go out and play as much football as they liked, just as long as Mohamed looked after Nasr.

When they arrived at the pitch, they found a group of boys sitting sadly in the goalmouth. They had no football, so what were they supposed to do?

Fortunately, Mohamed and Nasr had brought one.

‘Finally!’ the other boys called out, jumping up and dusting down their shorts. ‘Yeah, pass it over here!’

Mohamed kicked the ball to them and they took it in turns to shoot. The goal didn’t have a net, but the ball bounced back off the low wall around the



SALAH

pitch. The boys knew to keep everything under head height. They had learnt this lesson the hard way.

'Hey! What do you think you're doing?'

High shots had a horrible habit of landing in the surrounding flats. Sometimes they just got a telling-off; sometimes, they didn't get the ball back. It all depended on the damage done and the mood of the neighbour. So, it was best to aim low and hard instead.

'Right, let's pick teams!' Mohamed declared. After a few kicks, he was warmed up and ready to go. What were they waiting for?

'You can have Nasr, Abu and Khalid, okay?' decided Mahmoud, the eldest boy.

Mohamed nodded and tried to look happy. He would need to be at his very best because this was the worst team possible! His brother was the youngest and the smallest, while Ahmed and Khalid weren't exactly natural footballers.

'You can have kick-off!' Mahmoud offered.

'Wow, how kind of you!' Mohamed muttered to himself.



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It was a good thing that he was feeling determined. When Ahmed passed the ball back to him, Mohamed came alive. He dribbled forward at full speed, keeping the ball glued to his left foot. Three opponents eventually stopped him, but they still couldn't get it off him. With all attention focused on him, Mohamed slipped a pass through to Nasr. 1-0!

'Come on, guys!' Mahmoud moaned, throwing his arms up in the air.

Mohamed, on the other hand, didn't say a word. He just high-fived his brother and got ready to defend. They had a battle on their hands.

Mahmoud's team scored lots of goals, but they just couldn't cope with Mohamed's trickery. Every time he got the ball, he found a new way to get his team a goal. Sometimes it was a turn and shot; sometimes it was a stepover and a burst of speed; and sometimes it was a clever pass or cross.

'Right, half-time!' Mahmoud panted, sitting down in the shade.

But Mohamed didn't want the fun to stop.



SALAH

While the others rested, he carried on practising his skills. When he played football, everything else disappeared, especially the poverty and decay around him. He allowed himself to dream of a better life as a superstar footballer. He loved Nagrig, but how cool would it be to travel the world and become an international hero?

‘You’re going to be a big player one day,’ his friends were always telling him.

But as soon as he stopped kicking a ball, that dream seemed silly. How was he ever going to become a superstar footballer when even Cairo, Egypt’s capital city, felt like a million miles away?



MATT AND TOM OLDFIELD

ULTIMATE
FOOTBALL HEROES

VAN DIJK

FROM THE PLAYGROUND
TO THE PITCH



CHAPTER 1

EUROPEAN CHAMPION!

*1 June 2019, Wanda Metropolitano Stadium,
Madrid*

For Virgil and his Liverpool teammates, it felt great to be back in the Champions League Final for the second year in a row. Last time, they had lost 3–1 to Cristiano Ronaldo’s Real Madrid; this time, only a win would do.

Liverpool! Liverpool! Liverpool!

Although the location had changed, from Ukraine to Spain, the electric atmosphere in the stadium had stayed the same. That’s because the Liverpool fans were the best in the world, and they had plenty to cheer about, especially after the ‘Miracle of Anfield’.



VAN DIJK

Their terrific team had fought back from 3–0 down in the semi-final first leg, to beat Lionel Messi’s Barcelona 4–3! Now, with a victory over their Premier League rivals Tottenham, they could lift the trophy and become Champions of Europe for the sixth time.

Liverpool! Liverpool! Liverpool!

‘Are you ready, big man?’ the manager Jürgen Klopp asked his star centre-back as the players left the dressing room before kick-off.

Virgil didn’t say a word; he didn’t need to. Instead, he just gave his manager a confident nod. Oh yes, he was ready and raring to go! Big games called for big game players, and he was the ultimate big game player. That’s why Liverpool had paid £75 million to sign him from Southampton, making him the most expensive defender in the world. He was always so calm and composed. He never got nervous and he loved playing under pressure. He was born for this – the biggest stage in club football.

‘Right, lads,’ their captain Jordan Henderson called out from the front of the Liverpool line. ‘It’s time to



MATT AND TOM OLDFIELD

go out there and win the Champions League!’

‘YEAH!’ the other ten players cheered behind him:

Alisson,

Joël Matip,

Andy Robertson,

Trent Alexander-Arnold,

Gini Wijnaldum,

Fabinho,

Roberto Firmino,

Sadio Mané,

Mohamed Salah,

and in the middle, the man at the centre of everything – Virgil!

What a talented team, and their spirit was so strong too. After the ‘Miracle of Anfield’, the Liverpool players felt like they could achieve absolutely anything. They were all fired up and determined to put their previous disappointments behind them – losing the 2018 Champions League Final to Real Madrid, and also losing the 2019 Premier League title to Manchester City. That one still hurt badly, but a European trophy would help make them feel a whole



VAN DIJK

lot better. This was their moment to bring glory back to Liverpool Football Club.

As he waited in the tunnel, Virgil casually reached up a long arm to touch the ceiling above him, just like he did with the ‘This is Anfield’ sign back home. He liked to tap it for good luck, not that they would need any of that...

When the big moment arrived, Virgil walked slowly out onto the pitch in Madrid, straight past the Champions League trophy without even looking at it.

‘That can wait until it’s ours to keep!’ he told himself.

Virgil wasn’t messing around. In the very first minute, he muscled his way past Tottenham’s star striker Harry Kane to win the ball. He headed it down to Gini, who passed to Jordan, who lifted it over the top for Sadio to chase. The Liverpool attack looked so dangerous already. And as Sadio tried to chip the ball back to Jordan, it struck the Spurs midfielder Moussa Sissoko on the arm.

‘Handball!’ cried Sadio.

‘Handball!’ cried Virgil, way back in defence.



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The referee pointed to the spot. *Penalty!*

Mohamed stepped up and... scored – 1–0!

What a perfect start! Virgil jogged over to join in the team celebrations but then it was straight back to business. When there was defending to do, he was Liverpool's leader, organising everyone around him.

'That's your man, Joël!'

'Close him down, Gini!'

'Watch that run, Robbo!'

'Stay focused, Trent!'

'Come on guys, this isn't over yet!'

Virgil loved talking, and he spoke from experience. Once upon a time, he had been a talented young defender who made too many mistakes, but not anymore. He had learnt so many harsh lessons during his years with Willem II, Groningen, Celtic, Southampton and the Netherlands national team. And each one had helped to make him an even better, smarter footballer.

At half-time, Liverpool still had their 1–0 lead. They were now just forty-five minutes away from Champions League glory...



VAN DIJK

‘Come on lads, keep fighting!’ Klopp urged his tired players. ‘One more, final push!’

It was the end of a very long season, but Virgil wasn’t going to head off on his summer holidays empty-handed. No way, this trophy belonged to Liverpool! He fought hard for every header and tackle, and he won them all.

*He’s a centre-half, he’s a number four,
Watch him defend, and watch him score,
He’ll pass the ball, calm as you like,
He’s Virgil van Dijk, he’s Virgil van Dijk!*

Tottenham weren’t giving up, though. As Dele Alli played a quick pass forward to Son Heung-min, they had two vs. two in attack. Joël was marking Kane, which meant that it was Virgil’s job to stop Son Heung-min.

No problem! The South Korean had lots of speed and skill, but so did Virgil. He was the complete centre-back and not one Premier League striker had got past him all season. He knew exactly what to do



in these difficult situations...

Virgil followed Son all the way into the Liverpool penalty area, keeping up but never diving in. He wasn't that kind of a defender. Instead, Virgil waited patiently and cleverly until the crucial moment. Then he used his strength and long legs to clear the ball away for a corner-kick.

'Phew!' the Liverpool fans breathed a big sigh of relief. Virgil had saved the day yet again!

'Great work!' shouted Alisson, patting him on the back.

'Keep going!' shouted Virgil, clapping encouragingly towards his teammates.

There were still fifteen minutes to go, and a second Liverpool goal would really help to calm things down. What could Virgil do to help his attackers at the other end of the field? He sliced his shot in the Tottenham penalty area, but then battled to win the second ball. Virgil's flick-on landed at Joël's feet, who set up super sub Divock Origi to score. 2-0!

As the goal went in, Virgil was racing back



into defence. He turned and threw his arms up triumphantly. What would Liverpool do without him? He had played his part yet again. Now, they just had to hold on...

At last, the final whistle blew – Liverpool were the new Champions of Europe! Virgil didn't jump for joy like many of his teammates; instead, he fell to the floor. The exhaustion, the emotion, the excitement – at first, it was all too much for him to take. He had been dreaming about this moment since he was six years old. Was he still dreaming? No, it was real!

Virgil didn't stay down on the grass for long. His teammates wouldn't let him.

'We did it! We did it!' Gini Wijnaldum shouted, high-fiving his friend.

'Yes, Virg!' Alisson cheered, wrapping him in a big bear hug.

With tears in his eyes and the Anfield roar ringing in his ears, Virgil walked proudly around the pitch. He was a Champions League winner now. 'Champions League winner' – yes, he liked the sound of that.



MATT AND TOM OLDFIELD

‘I told you we’d win it!’ Virgil told his manager as they embraced near the halfway line.

After lots of hugs and high-fives, it was time for the Liverpool players to collect their winners’ medals and then, best of all, the trophy! As Jordan the captain lifted the cup high above his head, flames shot up around the stage. Virgil, of course, was at the back of the team huddle, towering over everyone and cheering at the top of his voice:

Campeones, Campeones, Olé! Olé! Olé!

What a feeling! One by one, Virgil was achieving all his childhood football dreams. First, he had become the new captain of the Netherlands national team and now, the Boy from Breda was a European Champion too.



CHAPTER 2

BOY FROM BREDA

Hellen van Dijk had four important life lessons that she wanted to pass on to her children:

Be respectful.

Work hard.

Stay positive.

Always follow your dreams.

For her eldest son Virgil, those dreams were all about becoming a professional football player. It had been his favourite sport since the very first time he kicked a ball. It was the only thing he ever talked about, and the only thing he wanted to do, all day, every day. At the age of six, he was already out there on the local pitches, battling for the ball and battling to be the best.



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‘Pass it!’

‘Hey, that’s a foul!’

‘Goooooaaaaaallllllll!’

Virgil was far from the only youngster with those superstar dreams, however. Football was the most popular sport in the Netherlands, where he lived, and also across the whole, wide world. So, the road to the top would be a long and winding one, especially for a boy from Breda.

Breda was a city in the south of the Netherlands, more famous for its factories than for its football stars. Although they did have a local team, NAC Breda, they played down in the Dutch second division. To Virgil, the big clubs like Ajax and Feyenoord felt a long, long way away. He didn’t really have many local football heroes to look up to, other than the big kids who showed off their skills on the pitches near where they lived.

Most of the best Dutch footballers either came from big cities in the north of the country:

Dennis Bergkamp, Johan Cruyff, Marco van Basten, Frank and Ronald de Boer...



Or, their families had moved to the Netherlands from a small country in South America called Suriname:

Patrick Kluivert, Edgar Davids, Clarence Seedorf, Aron Winter, Frank Rijkaard, Ruud Gullit...

And Virgil's mum! Yes, Hellen was from Suriname too, just like Seedorf and Davids! Sadly, she didn't have enough money to take her children on the long flight back to visit her birthplace. So instead, from their home in Breda, she taught them as much as she could about the history and culture of the country.

'We Surinamese like to stay calm and enjoy life,' she joked with Virgil. 'We're not as uptight as Dutch people like your dad!'

'Hey, I heard that!' Ron replied with a smile.

'Good!' Hellen laughed, before moving on to her son's favourite subject. 'And when it comes to football, our players have got it all – power, pace, and of course, that South American skill. No, you don't find that kind of natural talent in the Netherlands!'

At first having parents from different countries made Virgil feel a bit different from his friends, both

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those at school and on the pitch. But the older he grew, the prouder he became of his background. The Netherlands and Suriname – like all those football heroes before him, he was determined to bring together the best of both worlds.



CHAPTER 3

WDS'19

When Virgil arrived at his first training session with his local youth team in Breda, WDS'19, the coaches asked him the usual question: what position do you like to play?

‘Striker,’ he replied without even pausing to think.

Like most seven-year-old footballers, Virgil thought scoring goals was way cooler than stopping them.

The powerful feeling of ball hitting boot,

BANG!

The awesome sight of it flying past the keeper and into the net,

ZOOM!

And, best of all, the roar of the crowd celebrating your huge hero moment.



HURRAAAAAAY!

What could be better than that? Definitely not blocking other people's shots, that's for sure! Shooting or tackling – was that question even worth asking?! Not to young Virgil – he knew which one he preferred.

'Remember, the goalscorers get all the glory,' he taught his younger brother, who was learning fast about football. Soon, he'd be ready to go in goal and face Virgil's fierce shots. 'That's why the best players are always attackers.'

Virgil was aiming to become the next Ronaldinho, not the next Paolo Maldini. The Brazilian was always smiling and always trying out exciting new tricks. Virgil loved watching skilful players who looked like they were having lots of fun. To him, that's what football was all about.

'OK, well let's see how you get on up front then,' agreed Ferdi Hooeboom, John van den Berg and Rik Kleyn.

They were the three coaches in charge at WDS'19. The first thing they noticed about Virgil – other than

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his confidence – was his size. He was easily the tallest boy on the team, and once he started playing, easily the strongest too.

Virgil started the match in the striker's role, but he didn't stay there long. He wanted to be on the ball all the time, and he wasn't just going to wait for it to eventually arrive at his feet. He dropped deeper and deeper until he was in the middle of the field, at the centre of everything.

Then calmly and cleverly, Virgil took control of the game. He used his superior size and strength to win the ball back for his team, and then pushed his team forward with his dribbling and passing.

'He looks so comfortable on the ball,' van den Berg turned to Hoogeboom, sounding impressed. 'And he's not shy, is he, for a new kid?'

Virgil was organising everything, telling his teammates where to go and what to do.

'Luuk, make the run!'

'Bas, watch the left winger!'

'Come on guys, I'm marking two players here!'

Already, at the age of seven, this kid was clearly a



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leader. And he was clearly a defender or midfielder – not an attacker.

‘Why do kids always say they’re strikers?’ Hoogeboom, van den Berg and Kleyn laughed together, rolling their eyes. ‘Is that the only position they’ve heard of?!’

The WDS’19 coaches were delighted with their new young signing, and so were the players. Suddenly, the goalkeeper had hardly any saves to make, and the other defenders didn’t need to panic anymore – because, if their opponents did get through, Virgil was always there to save the day. No-one got past Virgil – no-one. He wasn’t the quickest player, but it didn’t matter. He was really good at reading the game and working out what the striker would do next.

‘He plays like a little professional already!’ Kleyn thought to himself.

Virgil loved every minute of every WDS match. He was actually quite happy about not being the striker because it meant he got to be more involved in the

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action – the passing, the tackling, the battling for the ball. Maybe he would be the next Maldini after all, or the next Edgar Davids in midfield. He would just have to save all his great goalscoring for kickarounds with friends.

Virgil wore his blue-and-white shirt with passion and pride. He was playing for a proper team now, with his own special shirt number on the back, just like his heroes. It felt like the first step on his journey to the top. WDS had links with the local professional football club, NAC Breda, and then after that? Who knew! Well, Virgil had a plan, of course.

‘One day, I’m going to play in a Champions League final,’ he told his dad excitedly as they drove home together after another WDS win, ‘and I’ll be the captain of the Netherlands national team too!’

