



*Thud!*

“Get to the ball first, Cody,” Coach Trevor yelled. “Play like it’s a game, not a practice. This is Major, not house league.”

Cody Dorsett took off down the right wing. His lungs bursting and his legs aching, he desperately wanted to rest. It was just a team practice after all. Luca, the outside left defender, was barreling over to head him off. Cody stretched out his left foot and flicked the ball to the right.

Luca’s chest hit him full-on and both boys fell to the ground.

“The team name is the Lions, not the Pussycats. Get up,” Trevor said.

Cody struggled to his knees and brought the ball under control with his left foot. Luca sprung up and lunged for

the ball. Cody pushed with his right foot and hand to lift himself up, just enough to shield the ball. Luca knocked him toward the sidelines, but Cody was able to keep his feet and drag the ball with him. His back to Luca, Cody head faked toward the goal line. Then he spun to his right, curling to the middle of the field. He had opened up some space.

“Move the ball,” Trevor said.

“Cody!” Kenneth yelled. The Lions centre midfielder cut into the box.

Jordan, a forward like Cody, waved his hand. He’d set up for a cross near the far post.

“I’m here,” another player called.

That was Paulo, the Lions third forward. He was about five yards back.

Should Cody shoot? Cross to Jordan? Take a chance inside to Kenneth? Or the simple pass to Paulo? For the briefest of moments everything seemed to slow down. He could see it now — so obvious. All but one of the passes were too high risk.

Cody gave it to Paulo.

“Good play,” Trevor said, with a quick nod. “Don’t give the ball away with dumb passes.”

*That feels better*, Cody thought. Trevor didn’t offer many compliments.

“You still suck, Dorsett,” Luca muttered as he brushed past him.

Cody laughed. They were good friends but fierce competitors. They were playing half-field, with the three forwards and two midfielders attacking against the four

Lions defenders and a midfielder, with David, their goalie, in net. Everyone was going full-out.

“Ring it around,” Cody shouted.

Paulo slipped the ball to Brandon, who punched it inside to Kenneth. Kenneth drifted left and fed Jordan at the far side. Kenneth cut back and took a pass from Jordan five feet from the box. When William and Luca collapsed on him, Kenneth had to give it up to Cody in the middle of the field.

“It’s five-on-five,” Trevor called out. “Attacking side, you need to create overlaps and support in groups of three. You’re too spread out and trying to attack as individuals.”

“Come on, forwards, stop being such losers,” Luca mocked.

They’d been at it for half the practice and the forwards hadn’t scored yet. The defenders weren’t giving them anything to shoot at. When they did have a chance, their goalkeeper David was there with his usual acrobatics to keep the ball out.

“To you, Paulo,” Cody said. He sent the ball to his right.

Paulo handled it nimbly, inching the ball with the outside of his right boot. He looked inside and raised his eyebrows ever so slightly.

Cody saw it too — a gap between Luca and William. Cody knew that Paulo could see it too. Finally, a chance! Cody took a few short steps toward the goal. Then, without warning, he broke into a full sprint into the gap. Paulo arced the ball around Luca’s left leg. Cody took a quick glance at Jordan, who had beaten his man on the left. David had come out to take away the angle.

Cross or shoot?

Again, the game slowed down for Cody. He knew the right play. He glanced again at Jordan. He didn't want to look like a ball hog. He took another step and then drove his right leg into the ball. David left his feet and threw his right arm out. The ball grazed his fingers and skidded outside the post.

Cody jumped up and slapped his hands together in frustration. Almost! He took another kick with his right leg.

"Not even close," Luca chuckled. "Coach, can we get some real forwards? These guys are pathetic."

"How dare you call me a pathetic forward?" Kenneth glared. "I'm a useless midfielder — and so is Brandon."

Luca slapped his thighs with his hands. "I can never keep that straight. The midfielders on this team are useless. It's the forwards who are pathetic."

"That was a nice set-up," Trevor said, coming over to Cody. "Not sure why you hesitated on that shot. David was caught in no man's land trying to guard against the cross to Jordan. A quicker shot might've scored. Your passing is beautiful, love it. But you're a striker. Your job is to score. A striker has to be like a hunter, like a predator stalking its prey."

"Sorry, Coach," Cody said. "I thought about chipping across to Jordan, then changed my mind. Stupid, because I knew the right play was to shoot. Awesome pass, Paulo. I wasted it."

"Keep the game simple, Cody. Always pass to me," Kenneth said.

"Soccer used to be simple." Cody laughed. "Now it's

about triangularity, ball possession, angles, and overlaps. Not sure I'll ever figure it out."

"Coach, I think you should ask Cody to leave. Bad enough he's a pathetic striker. But I will not accept him not passing to me all the time," Kenneth said. "And now would be a good time to compliment me on my awesomeness."

Trevor's eyes grew brighter, and the corners of his mouth curled up. "I'll take a rain check on that, but thanks for offering. As for Cody leaving, there is that troublesome fact that we only have eleven players. We'd have to default the rest of our games. And I kind of wanted to see if we would make the playoffs — and win the championship."

"I have a better idea. We could ask Timothy and John to come back and play for us," David said.

His joking suggestion made Luca groan. "Why not ask all the guys who ruined our lives and then quit on us? I really miss being abused by Antonio and Tyler and Michael too."

"Let's get Ian to be our manager again. He can bench us and we can keep losing all our games," Kenneth said. "Please, Coach, can we do it? I liked losing."

"Maybe another time." Trevor grinned. "For now, Timothy and his friends can keep playing on the Storm, and Ian can keep managing them. How about we get back to the drill? It's crunch time, lads. Playoffs are around the corner. Four games left, and we're battling it out with the Clippers, AFC, and South. Our bad start to the season is hurting us. We can't really afford to lose a game the rest of the way," Trevor said.

“We wouldn’t have lost those seven games in a row if Timothy and those jerks had just quit earlier,” Kenneth said.

“Let’s not worry about the Storm,” Trevor said. He paused. “But couldn’t you have made them leave before the season started?”

The boys laughed.

“First stop are the Flames,” Luca said. “Let’s douse them with a little Lion-ade, and then bring it home.”

“Well punned, my empty-headed defender,” Kenneth said. “Lions on three! One – two – three!”

The boys answered as one.

“Roar!”