

Mickey's Dad by Pete Barrett

He was the best footballer I've ever seen, bar none. Better than anyone playing in the Premier League or in Europe even in Brazil. It was as if the football was glued to his foot. He would turn and twist and slip around defenders leaving them stunned and staring at the space where he and the ball ought to be. He would surgically extract the ball from the feet of an opposition attacker, turn and run fifty yards, leave three defenders for dead and then launch an unstoppable shot at goal.

Goalkeepers might as well have stayed at home for all the good they did.

He never tired, never lowered his head, never stopped until the final whistle was heard and the game was won.

His name was Mickey. He was ten years old and he was the biggest nightmare I've ever had.

Before he arrived, it could never be said the team lacked consistency because week after week we consistently lost. Alright, there might be the occasional honourable draw but that would be it points wise. Half a dozen points was a good season and we rarely strayed from the bottom of the league. Pointless Parkfield I think they called us in what, in the world of boys football, passed as wit.

But, even after our most ignoble defeat, when even the referee was having difficulty keeping up with the goals scored against us, I would never criticise the boys. I would never shout at them or bemoan their lack of effort. And each week, in my post-match talk, I'd rack my brains to glean some crumb of comfort from the preceding ninety minutes of tragedy and farce. I knew. They knew. The whole world knew. We had yet again been ground into the turf by eleven bigger and much more talented boys from some third world council estate near Portsmouth.

Things however were about to change. In darkest January, a boy called Mickey arrived, and the transformation of the team was both miraculous and immediate. We won by seven goals to four. Nobody could believe it. Even the league secretary was incredulous when I rang up.

'4-7 you mean.'

'No, 7-4.'

'You won 7-4? Parkfield?'

'That's right, 7-4'.

The conversation could have gone on for the rest of my life but I was happy to repeat the words '7-4' as many times as was needed for the truth to sink in.

In the three glorious months that followed we moved from the bottom of the league to close to the top. It would be wrong to put it all down to Mickey, but it was always his name first on the scoresheet and with those goals came the essential ingredient of all successful team sport: confidence. And confidence is easy to build when you're three nil up, and these days, within half an hour, we nearly always were.

No longer were we the league joke. We became the team that everybody wanted to beat, but nobody could.

There was a catch of course. In life, there's always a catch.

In this case it came in the form of Mickey's dad, a chain-smoking foul-mouthed, pot-bellied bully of a man from up North who knew everything there ever was to know about football from hours slumped on the sofa watching satellite TV and reading the Sun. I was to gain the benefit of his advice from the word go.

'He's no good that lad, Stephen, we'll 'ave to get rid of 'im. Look at 'im, no idea. What's 'e doin' over there? Get back, lad, get back.'

And then he'd be off along the touchline shouting, mainly at Mickey of course, but the whole team was soon benefiting from his timely and helpful advice.

'You're a waste of space, lad. Why don't yer take up bally?'

'Tackle 'im then, yer fairy. Where's yer bloody wings?'

‘You’re miles offside. Wake yer self up lad. Yer’ve no place on a football field.’

The philosophy I had so carefully developed with the team, the liberal culture of blaming no one and providing opportunity for all regardless of talent, was crumbling before my eyes because of Mickey’s dad.

One afternoon I worked myself up to have a quiet word with him about all this.

‘I think,’ I said hesitantly after the game, ‘that it would be better if only one of us was shouting. Two of us shouting is just confusing the kids.’

‘Yeah, you’re right,’ he said. ‘You concentrate on getting the oranges ready for half time and I’ll look after things from the touchline.’

But it wasn’t until Stephen failed to turn up one Sunday that I realised how far Mickey’s dad had insinuated himself into a position of power within the team. Stephen was a tall gangling lad who had enough trouble controlling his over-sized body let alone managing anything like a football. But, despite his painful lack of talent, he always turned up for every training session, hadn’t missed a match for the last two years and devoted so much energy to his game that he never came off the field any less than staggering with exhaustion.

But then, on this particular Sunday, he failed to turn up at all. I asked around assuming that he must be seriously ill but it transpired that two of the lads had seen him that very morning having a kick about outside his house.

‘Oh, ’e’ll not be coming any more,’ said Mickey’s dad. ‘I ’ad a word wi’ ’is dad, you know, put him straight on a few things.’

‘What things?’

‘Well ’es no good is ’e? I mean I told ’im to let the lad down easy, but let’s be honest, he’s no place on a football field.’

‘But I am the manager of this team. I’m the one who drops people.’

‘I know, I know but yer too kind-hearted you. You’d’ve never get shot of ’im in a month of Sund’ys. So I did it for yer. You’ve got to be cruel to be kind sometimes.’

‘Now we’re one man short.’

‘No we’re not. Darren’s going to play. ’E’s registered and everything.’

Darren was Mickey’s brother: only just turned nine and, of course, a great player, far better than Stephen would ever be, so I had no choice but to play him. It was that or ten men. We won. Again.

It was three quarters of the way through the season and we were second from top. In three games time we would play the leaders and if we won that game we’d have won the league.

At this point I could have kept my head down. After all, it was me as manager not Mickey who would take most of the credit for such a glorious campaign, winning the league against all odds. But I didn’t.

Did I mention my son, William, played in the team? That’s how you become a team manager. You start by taking your son to the game and then one day you offer to help and the next minute you realise everyone else has faded away leaving you holding the baby, or in the case of my team, the babies. William was our penalty taker. This was not through favouritism you understand. He just happened to be the only one who could hit a static ball fairly hard in the general direction of the net. He scored some, missed most, but, before Mickey, if we scored at all, it was most often from the penalty spot.

It was the game before we took on that notorious top team that the penalty incident happened. The referee pointed to the spot and William nervously stepped up to take the kick. As was usual on these occasions, my heart began to race uncontrollably and deep dread filled my soul.

What happened next shocked me so much that I had to try to run it back in my mind in slow motion before I could take it in. As William was about to begin his run, Mickey stepped up grabbed him in a bear hug and pulled him to one side while his brother Darren appeared, as if out

of nowhere, took a quick run up, hit the ball hard and, of course, scored the goal that took us to victory.

By the end of the game, I had not only understood what had happened but had absorbed the fact that the two boys had obviously had the whole thing planned. And I didn't have to look very far along the touchline to see the mastermind behind this particularly audacious coup. Step up Mickey's dad.

Such was the joy and celebrations at our victory that neither the team nor their parents seemed to have noticed what had happened moments before. But I did and there was no way I was going to ignore the fact.

'Your boys are out!'

'I beg yer pardon.'

'Your boys are out of the team. They're dropped. Permanently. I never want them playing on this team again.'

'What are you talking about man, we won the game.'

'You saw what they did.'

'Yes. So what? We scored. That's what matters.'

'No it isn't. It isn't what matters at all. William takes the penalties. He always takes the penalties. That's what we agreed. And it's not up to you or your boys to change that. It's up to me.'

'Look, I know 'e's your lad, but admit it – 'e's a tryer but 'e's got no killer instinct 'as 'e?'

'This has nothing to do with him being my son.'

I realised in retrospect that this wasn't actually what he was saying but it was too late and I had gone too far to step back. What it came down to was me or them. Me as manager or Mickey and Darren and their dad breaking every rule in the world because all that mattered was winning.

But all that mattered wasn't winning. There were some things that were more important.

'They're out. They're out of the team. Don't ever bring them back here again.'

I suppose I should feel grateful he didn't punch me. He must have thought about it. It would have been in character. I watched him strut away with his two young sons in tow, neither of them beginning to comprehend what the fuss was all about. For just one second I indulged in a feeling of triumph. I had stood up for what was right and had achieved a moral victory against the ignorance and injustice. That's what seemed to have happened. But of course it hadn't.

I can't actually remember which parent phoned me. It was one I hadn't seen very much. One who was content to drop their boy off and pick him up later.

He was very polite but very firm. They wanted Mickey and Darren back in the team. We were one game away from winning the league and this would probably be the only chance our kids would ever have of genuine sporting success. Without Mickey and Darren, the team would not only lose but, with the eyes of the whole league on them, would be humiliated and shown to be a team of losers lifted out of obscurity by two good players who had already gone on to better things.

Of course I offered him the only two alternatives that honour would allow: the return of Mickey and Darren or my resignation. I would have preferred it if we'd spent a little time weighing up those alternatives rather than immediately going into the discussion about who would replace me, but then, that's life, isn't it? If you offer to fall on your sword you can hardly complain if it hurts your chest a bit.

I put down the phone and was immediately conscious of someone staring at me. It was William, my son. He had listened to every word and was standing in the doorway with a look so forlorn it cut straight through to my heart.

I gave a rueful smile.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll drop you off at the game.’