

Simple Goalkeeping Made Spectacular

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Extract

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It's mid-January. The sky is a mucky grey and it's hammering it down outside, though there are irritating patches of eggshell blue towards the south. I don't want a break in the clouds, I want it to lash down because we've got a game tomorrow and I want it to be called off. We're awaiting a groundsman's decision, apparently.

I don't even remember who we're playing and I can't be arsed to check back through my emails to find out, but the opposition will be just like us: a bunch of chronically unskilled middle-aged no-hopers who should know better, who should have hung up their boots; a bunch of silly old farts with grey hair and outrageous fantasies about their own playing abilities.

The reason I don't want to be involved is that I've got a touch of the flu. There will be mud. There will be more rain. It's as cold as a well-digger's arse out there and if there's no action in my goalmouth I'll be freezing and miserable. On the other goalkeeper's glove, if there *is* plenty of action, I'll be muddy and freezing and miserable. And probably depressed.

I play for England, by the way. Oh, all right, England Writers, if you must split hairs. I'm goalkeeper. Mudlark. Sandboy.

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Who is this groundsman we're waiting on? Well, you can depend on his name being Maurice. All groundsmen are cloth-capped pensioners called Maurice. They are all self-important retired engineers, or superannuated shopkeepers and being a groundsman is a part-time job they imagine keeps them fit and involved in the game. Just to enrage you further, they wear those Wellington boots with the rubber turned over halfway up the calf, so you can see a sweat-stained little band of dirty canvas.

Why this vitriol against groundsmen? I'll tell you. And, as my uncle Harold used to say, I'll tell you *for nothing*.

I've hated groundsmen since I was 16 years old and I played for my school, Nicholas Chamberlaine, a giant factory-fodder comprehensive in north Warwickshire, in a cup final game at the Barker Butts stadium in Coventry. It was a fine evening towards the end of May. I'd never played on such a splendid pitch. It actually had a covered stand, and the final had attracted 60 or 70 spectators – a crowd, by our standards – comprising parents and teachers. A referee in softly shining maroon livery had been brought in to officiate, and there he was in the centre circle, dispatching a spinning coin into the crisp evening air for the respective captain to make the call.

Win or lose, this would be a great evening. This was it. This was what it was all about. We'd battled through the early rounds, slugging it out deep into the tournament, to emerge victorious from the thrilling scrap of a semi-final that could have gone either way. It was heroic stuff, a schoolboy's dream. No one could spoil our moment.

Well.

I was in my goalmouth limbering up, trying to look the part. I could see that we had won the toss, as our captain had elected that we stay as we were. The referee placed

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the ball on the centre spot for the kick-off and I started hacking a stud mark in the six-yard line directly in front of the right-hand post, as I always did, for every single game, as a positioning reference. I was about to do the same in front of the left-hand post when I heard a deep-throated cry of umbrage from the touchline.

A cloth-capped guy with the physique of a slug, in those infuriating turned-down wellies, came marching across the pitch towards me. And I mean with that sort of belligerent stride where you get to see the full sole and heel of each oncoming boot before it slaps down hard on the turf. He was purple in the face. There was foam on his lips. He put his mouth about an inch from my face.

‘If I see any more of THAT,’ he bellowed in the delicate pink conch of my 16-year-old ear, pointing at my stud marks on the freshly painted six-yard line, ‘I’ll have your guts for GARTERS!’

I was astonished. Laying down a post-marker on the six-yard line was something I’d done for as long as I could remember. It was what the professional goalies did at Coventry City’s Highfield Road stadium, home keeper and away. They all did it. At least I *thought* it was what all goalies did.

The markers are incredibly useful. In the thick of the game, you might not think that you even see them, but I knew what all goalies know: the eye at speed processes information that the brain seems not to register. And, what the heck, after 90 minutes the pitch was going to be so pocked with thousands of similar stud marks that it would make no difference. Hell, it wasn’t as if they’d have to re-turf the entire pitch just because you’d dragged your stud over an inch or two of the grass near the goalmouth.

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I fingered the wax in my ear that the groundsman had just loosened. I looked at the stud marks, then I turned back to him and looked him in the eye.

‘Oh, fuck off,’ I said, softly.

It was bravado speaking rather than genuine insolence. I’d been so focused on the start of the game that I couldn’t believe what he’d just done to upstage the kick-off in front of all those people. And I only said it *very* softly.

He jumped back. I mean he literally and theatrically jumped back the full yard. The next thing I knew, he was calling for the referee.

‘Get down here!’ he shouted, as if the ref was five years old. ‘Get down here now!’

The rest of the boys stood with their hands on their hips as the referee, for some reason, picked up the ball – as if a thief might steal it – and jogged over to us. He was a bald-headed guy with burst veins in his nose, about the same age as the groundsman.

‘What’s going on?’

‘He just told me to fuck off. I want him sent off, no argument.’

The ref looked at me quizzically. I said nothing, so the ref asked me outright if it was true. Instead of answering his question, I said, ‘He just walked up to me and screamed right in my ear!’ I put a hand over my ear and affected a pained expression. I can do theatre just as well as you, I was telling the groundsman.

The ref looked at old purple face, who in turn pointed an angry finger at the site of my stud marks. ‘Look at the state of that! Just look at it!’

By now, we’d been joined by our schoolteacher, Mr Jones, who’d wandered over from the touchline to see what the hell was happening. Jones was a fiery Welsh

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hardcase and he took no shit. I was terrified that if he was informed that I'd sworn at the groundsman he'd have me off the pitch, military style. I decided to try to get everyone focused on the first offence, not the second. 'I've always done that!' I said, sounding mightily hurt. 'No one has ever told me you can't do that!'

'Do what?' said Jones.

'We break our backs with this pitch,' blustered the groundsman. 'Break our bloody backs. Then these kids come along with no respect for the shop. No respect for the shop at all.'

Jones rubbed his chin judiciously, looked at the stud marks, then at the groundsman. 'It's not a bloody bowling green,' he said.

The groundsman turned to the ref. 'There you are. No respect. None at all. What the hell can you expect when even the teachers are at it?'

Members of my team were by now drifting into the goalmouth to find out what was holding us up.

'Look, he didn't know,' said Jones. 'He knows now, don't you, son?'

I sort of nodded. I looked hurt by it all. Actually, I *was* hurt by it all.

'Can we please get on with the game?' said the ref. 'Please?'

The groundsman seemed to have forgotten the second and more serious offence – the 'fuck off' thing. He was like one of those lumbering rhinos I'd heard about who forget they're chasing you if you hide behind a tree for about three seconds. He wagged an impotent finger in my face before turning and walking off the field, muttering dark oaths. Jones shrugged at me and followed him off. Finally, the game got under way.

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We lost that cup final. I was unnerved and didn't play my best game. I'd like to blame it on old purple face, though the truth is we were outplayed. But my grudge against groundsmen, I discover today, seems to have lasted well into its 37th year.

Rhinos: short memories. Goalkeepers: long memories.

Meanwhile, I'm still waiting on this guy to decide whether the game is on. In my mind, it's the same bloke who bellowed at me for marking his pristine six-yard line. He'll love it, making that decision. The power to stop or allow a game of football; it makes his curved little spine tingle, I just know it does.

While we're on the subject, let's examine the business of whether it is actually contrary to the laws of Association football for a goalkeeper to scratch a mark on the pitch. The white lines on the playing field are very clearly designated in the rules and no other markings are allowed, but a stud streak in the mud and a white line are two very different things. When I was a lad, goalies always, always, always dropped a marker at right angles to the goalpost. You never see them do it now because, believe it or not, it can earn you a yellow card. Do it twice and you can actually get sent off for it.

It's just one of the many dirty tricks that Fifa have introduced over the years to make the job of the goalkeeper more difficult: no markers, no back pass to the goalkeeper, the six-second rule; worst of all, stunt balls that swerve as unpredictably as a lurid plastic beach ball on a bracing Skegness beach. Why? So we have more goals. Why do we want more goals in an already perfect game? So that the TV companies can offer more camera excitement and instant replay gratification. Why? So that they can maximise advertising revenue, which will in

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turn shift more ratburgers and more folding beds. The catering corporations are in league with the purple-faced groundsmen. They're hand-in-glove. Against us.

So, keepers like me now have to resort to limbering up and performing strange exercises at exact right angles to the goalposts, accidentally grazing the grass with our studs to leave guide markers on the six-yard line. I am dedicated to flouting this rule. Passionate about it. I've even thought of carrying (in my little Prada goalie's bag) a small tube of wet unslaked lime to squirt, if I could get away with it. I haven't yet found a way of substituting the stunt balls, but when I do I'll prove that the old, wet, heavy leather lace-up-type balls were much easier to save.

While I've been writing, information has come down the e-tube that the groundsman has made his decision. The grumpy, miserable, puce-faced toerag has called the game *off*, just because he has the power to do so. I can see him now, gritting his tobacco-stained teeth, tugging the peak of his cloth cap and shaking his head. I tell you, I've had it with these groundsmen.



'You must be bloody barmy.'

It's my dad, a retired coal miner, when I tell him that, at the age of 52, I'm going to start playing football again. I add that I've been selected for England. (Oh, all right, England *Writers*, if you insist on edging a story with fine points.)

'What, *you*?' he says. I feel like I'm in one of those