

Chapter 1 - Sunday 31/3/19

Sarah

As Sarah stood ready to kick-off in her match against South Stainley F.C., she felt excited but focused. Yesterday, Man City had comfortably beaten Fulham 2-0, going 1-0 up within five minutes of the match. Sarah hoped that her own team, Lingerfield F.C., would do the same.

Aguero had got on the score sheet yesterday, and Sarah was determined to keep her own goal-scoring streak going with at least one goal today. On the side of the pitch, Sarah's parents were shouting enthusiastically.

'Go on Sarah! Smash it in!' they hollered.

That is exactly what she planned to do.

Her manager, Owen, stood close to the half-way line, arms folded, silently waiting for the referee to blow his whistle for the start. The two substitutes for that day, Harry and Abdul, were passing a ball between them behind Owen; hoping to get onto the pitch as soon as possible.

Sarah looked around at her other six teammates. She wasn't the only girl on the team. Tara, who was also the team captain, played centre-back and was a ferociously good centre-back at that. There was a golden boot for the most goals scored which Sarah had her eyes fixed on. However, if there were a golden boot for tackles won, she'd have no chance against Tara. She was the rock at the back and a great captain.

The rest of the team were boys and good boys at that. Noah in goal. Mark in defence with Tara. Adam and Pavel on the wings, and then Nareem in the centre of midfield. They were all solid players who respected everyone's ability. They had a great team, and what's more, they were a team. Just like Man City in that respect.

Now it was game time. Time to show what they could do. Sarah took a final glance at the opposing team's goal. She hoped she'd soon be picking the ball out of the back of its net.

The ref blew, and Sarah immediately passed the ball back to Nareem. He passed out wide to Adam on the left-wing. Adam was lightning quick and pelted with the ball towards the corner flag.

South Stainley F.C. didn't know what had hit them.

The pace that Lingerfield F.C. had was something that teams were terrified of. Much like opposition players quivered when they saw Sane and Sterling soaring down the sides for Man City.

Adam reached the edge of the box and whipped in a cross. Stretching, Sarah tried to direct the ball goalward. She made the slightest contact, and the ball looked to be heading for the back of the net. Sarah followed its path. She wasn't totally sure that it was going in and wanted to be ready if it bounced back towards her. Her instinct was right.

The ball ricocheted off the right post as the South Stainley F.C. goalkeeper dived at it. Fortunately, as Sarah had anticipated this, she was able to react well before the two South Stainley defenders. She buried the ball into the bottom left-hand corner.

1-0 Lingerfield. Less than fifteen seconds played. Impressed by that Man City?

Sarah wheeled away cheering enthusiastically. She spotted Adam and gave him the biggest high-five and thanked him for the great cross. Nareem gave her a wink, and at the side, her manager gave her a big thumbs up. She didn't need to look at her parents: she knew they'd be jumping up and down shouting more loudly than anyone. Sometimes Sarah found this a little too embarrassing.

The ball was brought back to the centre circle, and Sarah prepared to kick off again. Would they get their next goal as quickly? It turned out, no. However, the rest of the game was much the same as the first fifteen seconds. Lingerfield in complete control with their opponents baffled as to how to deal with them.

South Stainley F.C. had small parts where they played well, but for the most part, Lingerfield F.C. were just too strong. Twenty minutes into the first half Sarah grabbed her second goal, completing her brace. A well-timed pass through from Nareem found her one on one with the keeper. Yesterday, Aguero had chipped the keeper, but Sarah didn't want to risk it. She waited for the keeper to rush out, then skilfully took the ball round him. The empty net awaited her, and she calmly stroked the ball home to make it 2-0.

At half-time, Owen told them to keep doing what they were doing, and to not get too arrogant. 'They might be 2-0 down, and near the bottom of the league, but if they get one goal back here, they're back in it. You have to respect your opponent right until the end of the game.'

All of the team nodded and took on what Owen said. There'd been times before where Lingerfield had been up by more than two, but Owen always insisted they play like the game was still in the balance. It was one of the things that made him such a good coach. He was just like Pep, the manager of Man City, in that respect.

After five minutes of the second half, Mark came charging forward from a corner and headed into the top left to make it 3-0. It didn't seem Lingerfield would be slipping up today. Sarah was thrilled with how they were playing.

She didn't get too complacent though as she knew there was still the rest of the game to see out. In fact, South Stainley F.C. had one or two good shots in the second half, but it was nothing that Noah couldn't deal with. One particular long-range effort looked to be sailing into the bottom left, but at the last minute, Noah was able to agilely leap across his goal-front and knock the ball out for a corner. That was the only real scare that Lingerfield faced all game.

When the whistle went, and Sarah shook hands with the dejected looking South Stainley players before going and giving each of her teammates a big high-five. It was a satisfying performance where the team had done exactly what they needed. Sarah went to Tara last, and the two girls hugged each other contentedly.

'We've done our bit,' said Tara.

'Now we just have to hope SLS United slip up against Nidd,' Sarah replied.

Sarah reflected later on that Tara had been right to just focus on their result. They couldn't control SLS United's matches; only their own performance. Lingerfield F.C. and Man City had their destinies in their own hands. They just needed to win their remaining games. Sarah tried to focus on this positive thought as she nervously waited for the results of the SLS United match to go on the league website and for the late Sunday Kick off between Liverpool and Spurs. If Liverpool and SLS United won, they'd both still be top at the end of this weekend.

Yonis

Relaxing into his sofa at the end of the dramatic Liverpool game, Yonis breathed a massive sigh of relief. Liverpool had left it late, but thanks to a Spurs own-goal they had won. This meant that they still stayed at the top of the Premier League by two points. Unfortunately, Man City had looked very comfortable against Fulham and had brushed them aside to keep within touching distance of Liverpool.

However, Yonis was happy that the tricky match at home to Tottenham had ended in the right result for Liverpool. Man City had a tricky home match against Cardiff midweek, which was their game-in-hand. Cardiff, who were battling relegation as well, had nearly beaten Chelsea this weekend. Maybe they'd nick a point off City if they showed the same determination and grit. This would mean Man City wouldn't overtake Liverpool and the title would be Liverpool's to lose once again. This at least gave Yonis something to feel cheery about at the end of this weekend.

The SLS United result earlier that same morning, however, was a completely different story.

Disaster is often an overused word. For Yonis, the game against Nidd Ranger that morning had been a TOTAL disaster. As he watched the post-match discussion on the Liverpool game, he started to go over everything that had happened in the match and how it could've gone differently. Most of all though, he thought about the end, what had happened and the real issue that now faced Yonis.

SLS United V Nidd Rangers - earlier that day...

The match was cagey at first. Both teams really wanted to win, but more than anything they didn't want to lose. Missed passes, late tackles and the ball going off the pitch were the highlights of a truly unforgettable opening. But then Nidd Rangers started to get the ball down and play.

They started to make the SLS United outfield players feel like they were chasing shadows. None of them could get close to the Nidd players, and so soon enough the shots started flying.

Fortunately, Yonis was up to the challenge. Shortly, after the Nidd Rangers pressure had started, he was forced into pulling off two high-quality, goal-saving stops. These were met with great enthusiasm by Yonis' dad who watched every

week from the sideline, from Mussef (the manager of SLS United) and his teammates.

‘You legend Yonis!’ Patrick, the team captain and centre-midfielder for SLS united, shouted at him after his second one. Yonis felt unbeatable.

‘Keep your heads team’ shouted Mussef from the sidelines. ‘Yonis can’t keep pulling off wonder stops; we need to start playing some football and making some passes again.’

The two defenders for SLS United, Toby and Mario, were unusually error-prone during the first half of the match and didn’t seem able to do basic passes.

‘Toby, will you look up before you pass!’ Patrick barked at him after another misplaced pass. On the wings, it wasn’t much better. Michelle and Chloe were not whipping in the defence-splitting crosses that they usually did, and upfront Jonas looked totally isolated and frustrated.

Inevitably, Nidd Rangers were going to find a way through. In the last five minutes of the half, they did.

Their striker pounced on another misplaced pass by the nervy Toby. Gathering the ball, he rounded on Yonis and his goal. Despite Yonis making himself as big as possible, the Nidd striker was easily able to curve the ball around him.

1-0 to Nidd Rangers.

Yonis tried not to yell at Toby as it wasn’t his style. Toby’s dad gave him more than an earful for it though.

‘Toby! WAKE UP. Your team is playing in blue, not red. Can you start looking at who you pass to?’ he’d shouted passionately at him after the blunder. Toby’s head had dropped, but Patrick tried to reassure him as he kicked the ball back to the centre circle.

‘Only 1-0 Tobes, loads of time to go’.

The last five minutes of the half, SLS United were under even more pressure from Nidd Rangers though, and Yonis had to pull off his most wonderful save yet. Diving to his top left and just inching a soaring shot over his crossbar with his stretching finger-tips.

Half-time.

‘We need to start passing to each other.’ Mussef started calmly, despite it being obvious to everyone that he was very frustrated by their first-half showing. ‘For the first five minutes, I just want you to play the ball about; remember what it feels like to string some passes together, understood?’

Everyone nodded; Yonis wasn’t sure though whether Toby was particularly fond of this idea.

Second half.

It started with Patrick calmly stroking the ball out to Chloe on the wing. She passed it back. Patrick moved it to Mario. Nervously, Mario passed to Toby. Toby, even more anxiously, swept the ball back to Patrick. Patrick then passed out to Michelle on the other wing. Then Michelle got it to Jonas for his first touch of the game almost it seemed.

Amazingly, SLS United managed to string together ten more passes without losing the ball. Mussef's advice had worked. Their heads had suddenly lifted, and it felt that the match was swinging in their favour.

Another five minutes later, it really shifted in their direction. Jonas, who despite maybe touching the ball less than ten times, found himself with the ball at his feet with his back to his defender. In a moment of brilliance, he turned around his dead-footed defender and bent a ball right into the top corner (he must've watched Sterling's England goal a little while back against the Czech Republic).

1-1

Yonis felt like the tide was turning at this point in the match, and a mere two minutes later, captain fantastic himself, Patrick, rattled in an absolute beauty of a long-range shot past the flailing Nidd Rangers Keeper. He hadn't stood a chance.

2-1

SLS United had turned it all around so swimmingly, and their cheering fans and manager looked on happily from the sidelines. Yonis knew they just had to not do anything stupid for the rest of the match and victory would be theirs.

With two minutes to go, Yonis was confident that his Sunday was going to get off to the perfect start with a hard-fought win by SLS UNITED. They were still 2-1 up, and it looked like Nidd Rangers had all but accepted defeat.

Then it happened.

SLS United, passing the ball around fluidly as they had been for most of the second half, looked in total control. Then, the now reborn Toby stumbled over a small hole in the pitch. Having lost control of his feet, Toby knocked the ball mid-stumble and sent it into no man's land between himself, Mario and Yonis.

The Nidd Ranger striker, who had like Jonas in the first half, had become a completely isolated figure was first to react. He pounced on the ball and was heading for Yonis. This time though Yonis was determined he wouldn't be beaten. He rushed out at the feet of the oncoming striker. Hands spread wide. Eyes glaring at the striker. Yonis planned to put him off and try and sweep the ball away (Alisson Becker style). But right as the striker and Yonis were about to meet, the cheeky forward attempted to flick the ball to the left and go round Yonis.

Instinctively, Yonis held out his leg. It one hundred per cent player and zero per cent ball. The Nidd striker was therefore sent hurtling to the floor.

Penalty to Nidd Rangers.

Yonis, who was usually always the calmest and most controlled player during matches, had a red mist come over him at this point. He couldn't have given away a penalty.

'He's dived, ref! The cheating liar has dived!' he barked aggressively at the referee - completely forgetting himself.

'Excuse me. The call has been made. It's a penalty.'

'You're an idiot! Are you blind? My leg never touched him.' Yonis replied furiously.

‘I wasn’t going to send you off for the trip as it’s near the end of the game, but if you speak to me like that again you will be off, and banned for the next two matches, do you hear?’

At this point, Patrick arrived to try to calm Yonis down.

‘Yonis! Breath. The decision is made. It’s a pen. Now, just focus on saving it!’ But Yonis wasn’t listening.

‘You can send me off, or do whatever you like, but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s cheated, and you’ve given a penalty for nothing!’

‘Yonis, that’s enough!’

It was Mussef now on the pitch, closely followed by Yonis’ father who looked slightly embarrassed. ‘You didn’t get the ball. Even I saw that. Get your mind ready for the penalty,’ stated Mussef authoritatively.

‘Are you ALL blind? I didn’t touch him!’ Yonis now exploded. Everyone stood slightly in shock at seeing Yonis this way. It was his dad who spoke next.

‘You get in that goal ready for that penalty and do not say another word, or I will ban you from football for two weeks myself,’ he said firmly.

Yonis glared at his dad, and was just about to reply when he thought better of it: he knew he was already in enough trouble.

‘FINE!’ snapped Yonis and he trudged in between his goal-posts.

The Nidd striker already had the ball on the spot and was looking at it intently. Not making eye contact with Yonis, he waited for the whistle.

Usually, Yonis is a penalty specialist. Today though, he had a fire and rage burning inside him that he knew was only going to result in one thing: him not saving the penalty.

So it turned out. The Nidd striker confidently sent the ball the completely opposite way to which Yonis dived.

2-2.

Yonis stared at the back of the goal net and tried to comprehend what had just happened. They were going to drop two points, and it was all his fault. More seriously though, Yonis had been totally out of line, and he had no idea what that meant for his place on the SLS United team. If a Liverpool player had been so openly defiant to their manager, Jurgen Klopp, would he still pick them?

Back on the sofa, the post-match analysis had ended. Yonis’ dad had given him permission to watch the match program, but then it was TV off and to his room. He’d also told Yonis that he and Mussef were going to have a serious chat about what to do with Yonis and that they would talk to him about it on Saturday at training.

Had Yonis blown it? Was he going to be dropped right at the moment when SLS United needed him most? These worries filled his mind, along with the fear that Man City might topple Liverpool by beating Cardiff on Wednesday, as he slumped up to his room.

Follow-up questions

Sarah

1. Who plays in goal for Sarah's team?
2. Who is the captain of Sarah's team and who is the manager?
3. Does Sarah like her teammates? What evidence is there to support this?
4. Adam's cross is described as being 'whipped in'. What does this mean?
5. What kind of manager does Owen seem like? Support your answers with two reasons.
6. Tara tells Sarah after the match: 'We've done our bit'. What does she mean by this?

Yonis

1. Who is Man City's game in hand against?
2. At the start of the flashback, the match is described as 'cagey'. What does this mean?
3. Who makes a mistake for the first Nidd goal?
4. What is the problem with SLS United in the first half? What weren't they doing?
5. Why were Yonis' father and manager so embarrassed by his behaviour?

Chapter Two of Chase for the Championship will be published next week.

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions, please email **hello@jamessteptowe.com** or tweet me **@jamessteptowe**

You can also visit my website: **jamessteptowe.com** for more updates on **Chase for the Championship**, and my **debut full-length children's book: Raid of the Ratskull Rodents coming May 2019.**

Thanks for reading.

Results: Sunday: 31/3/19

SLS United 2 - 2 Nidd Rangers

South Stainley F.C. 0 - 3 Lingerfield F.C

Ripley Albion 2 - 1 Ripley United

Killinghall United 1 - 1 FC Scriven

Brearton Town 3 - 1 AFC Farnham

Table standing after weekend of 31/3/19 fixtures:

Position	Teams	Played	Wins	Draws	Losses	Goal Difference	Points
1.	Lingerfield F.C.	12	9	1	2	+31	28
2.	SLS United	13	8	3	2	+24	27
3.	Ripley Albion	13	7	3	3	+14	24
4.	Nidd Rangers	13	6	4	3	+15	22
5.	Brearton Town	13	8	0	5	+6	23
6.	Killinghall United	13	5	6	2	+1	21
7.	FC Scriven	13	5	5	3	-2	20
8.	AFC Farnham	12	6	1	5	-8	19
9.	South Stainley F.C.	13	4	5	4	-11	17
10.	Ripley United	13	2	6	5	-15	12

Fixture list Sunday 7/4/19

Lingerfield F.C. V AFC Farnham

Ripley United V Brearton Town

FC Scriven V SLS United

Killinghall United V South Stainley F.C.

Nidd Rangers V Ripley Albion