

1 FOUL PLAY

“Mido! Over here!”

Gavin dug his cleats into the soft ground and sprinted toward the goal. “Over here!” he yelled again.

On the left side of the field, Gavin’s friend Mido had the ball at his feet. He stepped past a big defender and crossed the ball into the danger area. Gavin leaped as high as he could, but the cross just cleared his head.

He turned and saw the ball in the opposing goalkeeper’s hands.

“Good try, Gav!” shouted Mido.

The keeper kicked long. A forward received the ball on his thigh, nudged it to his right, then smashed a shot toward the bottom left corner. At the last moment, a pair of long arms stretched out and snagged the ball out of mid-air.

“Great save, Critter!”

Gavin watched their goalkeeper scramble to his feet. Critter was unbelievable. Even with his long, lanky limbs he was quick, alert, and could catch almost

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anything. Mido, the smallest player on the team, had once said the guy was half-octopus and half-giraffe. That's why everyone called him Critter.

Critter's long throw soared into the opposition's half of the field. Pushing past a defender, Gavin stretched to get to the ball first. He spun around, faked left, then went right. Two defenders lunged and missed. The goalkeeper moved out to cut down the angle.

"Gavin!" called a voice to his left. He glanced sideways and saw Mido.

Ignoring his friend, he sent a shot curling around the keeper. It bounced in off the far post.

"Nice shot," said Mido.

Gavin felt a little guilty, high-fiving his friend. He knew he could have passed instead of scoring himself. But Mido had a special talent for missing empty nets, and Gavin wanted to win.

The referee blew his whistle three times. Players from both teams jogged over to the side of the field.

It was halftime at their final match of the summer in the City Seven-a-Side League. Gavin's team, the Kingsgate Lions, was made up of ten best friends from his middle school soccer team.

Nine best friends, Gavin corrected himself, catching a glimpse of Craig O'Connor on the sidelines. Craig was standing with some of the other substitutes, laughing as he juggled a soccer ball. Gavin noticed that he was wearing a new pair of boots, his third pair of the

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summer. These ones were orange and white.

Craig never bothered warming up. He never even stretched. He acted like he was too gifted to bother with that kind of stuff.

Hard to pull a muscle when you're that lazy, thought Gavin.

“Good hustle, Lions!”

Gavin looked up and saw Mr. O'Connor walking onto the field. One again, he seemed to have forgotten the water bottles. All around, players' shirts were drenched with sweat under the hot August sun.

“Good game, guys,” said Mr. O'Connor, clapping his hands together. “You really attacked their end zone and crashed their defence.”

Gavin heard Mido snort behind him. Mr. O'Connor was always bragging about his time as a football quarterback at university. He seemed to think it made him an authority on every sport, including soccer. It didn't.

But Mr. O'Connor had been the only parent willing to coach their summer team. There had been one condition: His son Craig had to be on the team.

“Gonna shake things up this half, fellas,” said Mr. O'Connor. “Keep 'em guessing, you know? We'll throw Noel in at left defenceman —”

Another snort from Mido.

“— and Craig in for Mido up forward in . . . What's that position called again? Streaker?”

Striker. Someone groaned.

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“But . . . but . . . Craig always plays right back,” Mido burst out. “And I already subbed off once in the first half!”

Mr. O’Connor cleared his throat. “Yeah, but we need to win this game, Mido. And I think we need someone out there who can really dipsy-doodle around their defencemen.”

Gavin knew he should speak up and support his friend against the coach. But somehow the words wouldn’t come.

Behind them, the referee whistled for the teams to return to the field.

Mido shook his head in disbelief. “Defencemen,” he muttered under his breath. “End zone. Shake things up. Dipsy-doodle.”

The Lions were ahead in the match 3–0, but their work wasn’t finished yet. To win the summer league championship, they needed to score at least six goals.

Gavin had scored all three goals in the first half. He was sure he could get three more.

Lining up in the centre circle, he glanced over at Craig standing there lazily in his orange-and-white boots. *That guy cares more about the way he looks than about winning the match,* he decided.

He is more skilful than Mido though, Gavin thought, feeling guilty once more.

The whistle sounded. Gavin tapped the ball to his teammate.

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“Watch this,” Craig said.

Gavin watched as Craig slipped the ball past one opponent. He did a fancy step-over fake. Then another. And another. His orange boots flashed as he flipped the ball up into the air and caught it on his foot.

“Hey, cross it!” shouted Gavin, sprinting forward.

Craig ignored him and dribbled past one defender, then another. He tried a shot from a wide angle, which soared high over the net.

Gavin clenched his fists in frustration. “Why didn’t you pass?”

“Shut up,” Craig sneered. “You just wish you had my skills.”

Maybe if I wanted to be in the circus, thought Gavin. But this is a soccer game. I want to win.

The goal kick from the opposing goalkeeper was a bad one. Gavin intercepted it easily and raced toward the goal. He slipped the ball past the keeper and into the back of the net.

4–0!

A few minutes later, he tackled a defender cleanly, taking the ball. This time, as the goalkeeper charged, Gavin saw Craig to his right. He ignored him and slotted the ball into the goal himself.

As Gavin jogged back, he could hear Craig behind him, swearing loudly.

Mido cheered from the sidelines. “Come on, guys — one more goal!”

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“Coach!” shouted Critter from the goal. “Put Mido back on. It’s his turn!”

Mr. O’Connor waved him away. “Not now.”

Gavin was sure Mido was going to lose it on the coach, but he didn’t. He just kept clapping his hands, encouraging his teammates to score one more.

How can he stand it? Gavin wondered. If Coach O’Connor treated me like that, I’d go home.

When they kicked off again, Craig nicked the ball right off Gavin’s boot. He then did more step-overs than Gavin had thought possible for a single human soccer player. Two defenders were fooled but a third tackled the ball away.

Gavin lunged in, winning the ball back. He swerved past a diving defender. He tried to shoot, but someone barged into his shoulder, knocking him to the turf.

He looked up and saw Craig standing over him. Unbelievable! He’d been fouled by his own teammate.

Craig’s shot soared over the net again.

Minutes later, at the other end of the field, Critter caught a high cross. He kicked the ball forward. Gavin reached it first. He slipped the ball through a defender’s legs, then swung his right foot to shoot.

Whoosh! Nothing but air.

He spun around in horror, just in time to see Craig slice a shot wide of the far post.

“What’s wrong with you?” Gavin hollered. “What do you think you’re doing?”

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Craig glared back at him.

The teams battled in midfield for a moment until the ball popped loose, right to Gavin. He took a long shot before Craig could get near him. The goalkeeper tipped it over the bar for a corner kick.

“Gavin!” shouted Mido from the sidelines. “Two minutes left. Let’s get everyone up there! You too, Critter. Everyone!”

The tall goalkeeper started running forward.

This was it. Last chance. Do or die. Time to risk it all.

But then Gavin saw Mr. O’Connor, red-faced, waving Critter back. “Critter, what are you doing? You’re the goaltender. Get back in the goal!”

Critter slowed, then stopped at the halfway line. He looked right at Gavin, obviously unsure what to do.

Gavin glanced at Mr. O’Connor, then at Mido, then back at their empty goal. He shrugged at his lanky friend. Critter hesitated, but then turned and began to jog back.

Mido threw up his hands in disbelief.

The corner kick flew into the area, curling away from the goalkeeper’s reaching hands. It was perfectly lined up for Gavin. He leaped into the air, aiming his forehead at the ball.

There was a hard shove against his back, right between the shoulder blades. His face thudded into the grass. He heard the ball smack someone else’s forehead.

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Rolling over, he saw the ball loop high and wide of the net.

Somewhere in the distance, the referee's whistle sounded three times, ending the match.

5–0. One goal short of the championship.

Gavin climbed to his feet. He saw Craig, with his mean pock-marked face, and glared back at him.

“Don't blame me, ball hog,” snapped Craig. “I had that header lined up. You were in my way.”

Gavin said fiercely, “I'll get you for this.”

“Whatever,” laughed Craig. “Who cares about this stupid summer league? After next week, I'll be on the best soccer team in the city. You and Critter and Mido will all be stuck at Vandyke.”