

golden goal

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Play On...

A young boy sits on his grandfather's couch. He has grazes, cuts and wounds all over his legs from where the other boys have fouled him. It was the only way they had been able to stop him...

He squeezes his eyes tight shut as his grandfather puts plasters over his injuries. It hurts...

The grandfather scuffs up the boy's hair with the palm of his hand and smiles...

"If they foul you, JJ, it means they're scared of you. Just keep coming back for more..."

Part
One
Eight years later



Time to Shine

Thursday 28 May – The day of the Youth Cup Final

Jamie Johnson picked up his gleaming new football boot and kissed it for good luck. Then he slipped his left foot into it.

There were just ten minutes to go until the kick-off of the Youth Cup Final and Foxborough's Academy Director, Steve Brooker, had his young team gathered around him in the dressing room.

"OK, lads, I'm going to keep this brief," he said, looking each one of the players in the eye as he talked.

“You know why we’ve brought you to this club. We believe that you have something about you – as a footballer and a person – that marks you out as different ... that marks you out as a Foxborough player.

“Now the question is: can you bring those attributes, that talent, to the table when it matters most? It’s all very well turning it on in training or beating a team in a friendly. But can you do it in a game like tonight – with a full stadium, live on TV, with a proper trophy at stake?

“The truth is that probably only one or two of you will make it into the Foxborough First Team. That’s just the way football is. But don’t forget, all the other clubs will be watching tonight. This is the biggest advertisement your talent will ever have...

“And I’m not going to lie to you either. We all know that Foxborough is a rich club. The manager can go out any time he wants and buy a fully-paid-up superstar. So why would he pick *any* of you to go into his first team?

“Why? I’ll tell you why: because you are all special footballers.”

Steve was pacing back and forth along the dressing-room floor in front of his players. Then he turned and stood perfectly still, his eyes shining with intent.

“There are three types of people in life,” he said. “There are those who, for whatever reason, do not

or cannot recognize an opportunity when it arises. There are those who *do* recognize an opportunity but find themselves unable to take it. And then there are those who see the opportunity and seize it with both hands.

“Tonight, it’s time for you to go and show the world who you are and everything we have been working on... Now go and win that trophy!”

As the two teams walked out on to the pristine Foxborough pitch, the bright beam of the floodlights focused their glare on Jamie Johnson – at fifteen the youngest player on either side. He felt a sudden chill of fear shiver up his spine towards his skull.

There were lots of good reasons for him to be nervous tonight. This was the first live TV match that he had ever played in. It was also the first game he had ever played at The Lair, Foxborough’s home ground, the biggest stadium in the country. And the referee had his whistle in his mouth and was about to get this crucial game under way any second now...

But the real reason Jamie’s body had become stiff with tension was that the big electronic screens inside the stadium had just shown that the entire Foxborough First Team squad, including their captain, Dave Lewington, were all in the ground tonight. They had

received a huge cheer from the crowd when they had come up on the screen.

And, as if the players being there wasn't enough, Brian Robertson, manager of Foxborough and one of the most successful managers in the history of football, was also in the crowd.

Tonight, he would be watching Jamie Johnson ... and judging him.



Three Amigos

Seeing Brian Robertson up in the stands had released a curse of nerves in Jamie's body.

He held his hand out in front of him. It was quivering like a crossbar rocked by a thunderbolt of a shot.

He tried to calm himself down. It was still just a football match. All the same rules applied: eleven players against eleven players; whoever scored more goals would win the game. Simple. He just had to get the ball and do his stuff.

But it was no good. Deep down, his stomach had a direct line through his body to his brain and it was saying something else. This wasn't just like any other

game. It was the start of his Foxborough career. And he was being watched by Brian Robertson...

As the two teams lined up to shake each other's hands, Jamie took his usual place in between his two room-mates. Xabi Negredo and Antony Asamoah were Jamie's two best mates in the whole team and the three of them were the best players too.

Xabi was a young Spanish left back who tackled so hard they had given him the nickname "The Butcher". Meanwhile, Antony Asamoah, the striker from Ghana, was as fast as lightning. So they called him Bolt.

Standing side by side with The Butcher and Bolt, Jamie could feel his heart start to rise with hope.

They were the *Three Amigos*. All completely different. All great mates. And all fantastic footballers. Between them, they had all the talent required to destroy any team.

Now they just had to go and prove it.

Youth Cup Final
Kick-Off
Foxborough v Harrington

Almost immediately, Foxborough's game plan evaporated in front of them. Steve Brooker had specifically ordered his team not to give away any set pieces in the first fifteen minutes. So Jamie couldn't

believe it when they conceded a corner with only three minutes on the clock.

Panic began to spread throughout the Foxborough defence; no one knew who to mark or who was supposed to attack the ball... Then, when the corner came in, Robbie Walters, the Foxborough centre back and captain, made such a wild slash at his attempted clearance that the ball ended up spinning off the outside of his boot and spiralling into the roof of his own net.

It was a horrific own goal. Foxborough were already a goal down.

The worst possible start for Jamie and his teammates.

Youth Cup Final
Foxborough 0 - 1 Harrington
R Walters 06.4

Steve Brooker immediately came out from his dugout to the edge of the technical area to try and urge a response from his team but, for some reason, on this, their big night, they just couldn't find their rhythm.

Yes, they had Bolt, who was six foot two and as fast as anything upfront. And yes, they had Jamie Johnson, the most skilful player on the pitch, out on the wing. But if Foxborough couldn't get them the ball, what use were they?

Jamie only had one chance to go on a run during the

whole of the first half. And he went around his marker so easily that he knew he could take him any time he wanted. But no one was passing him the ball to give him the opportunity to do it again.

It was only Robbie Walters – making amends for his earlier own goal with a looping header just before half-time – that had got Foxborough back on level terms. And they were lucky to be there.

Youth Cup Final
Foxborough 1 - 1 Harrington
R Walters, 41 R Walters OG, 4

As the Foxborough players trudged back to the dressing room, each one of them knew that they had let themselves down. And, if they didn't, Steve Brooker was just about to remind them.

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Give it to Jamie

Youth Cup Final
Half-Time
Foxborough 1 - 1 Harrington
R Walters, 41 R Walters OG, 4

“What you lot need to do is forget about the TV cameras,” said an angry Steve Brooker, while his players sat looking at the floor.

“And Brian Robertson being here. All that stuff’s irrelevant. Remember what I always tell you: this is a simple game – get the ball, pass it to your mate and have a shot on goal... Boys, you have to trust yourselves to play.”

Steve's eyes were ablaze with ambition; this was *his* big night as well as his players'.

"And Jamie," he said, turning to face his left-winger. "Their full-back is scared of you. Petrified. You only have to wiggle your hips and he falls over. Trust me. He wants to go home and cuddle his mum! He's had enough!"

The boys laughed but, as their chuckles subsided, Steve was still focusing his attention on Jamie.

"So when you're one-on-one with him, take him on. Every time," he said, pacing steadily towards Jamie. "Show him how good you are. Show everyone how good you are – including yourself."

He put his hand on Jamie's shoulder and gave the muscle above his collarbone a firm but friendly pinch.

"And why don't you try the snake?"

The snake was the new skill that Jamie had been working on for the last few weeks in training.

It was a Brazilian skill in which the attacker flicked the ball outside and then inside of the defender in one rapid movement. If it was done properly, the defender stood no chance; his body and brain would be twisted in different directions before he eventually lost balance. The snake was the single most impossible skill to defend against.

And only Jamie Johnson had the skill, speed and confidence to pull it off.

“Just show it to him once... You’ll destroy him.”
Steve Brooker smiled. “And lads – let me make this very simple for you: when we get the ball, we give it to Jamie.”