

I

Never saw it coming

There is no greater feeling.

Only a goalkeeper knows what it feels like to leave the planet – take off without thinking – stretch as far as the sinews will allow – just get the fingertips to a spherical piece of synthetic leather – deflect it far enough to scrape off the top of the crossbar – and then thump back to earth like a sack of shit.

Exhilarating.

And it doesn't happen often. There has to be that supremely rare combination of a striker's shot – hit exactly in the right place at the right velocity, which just happens to match the absolute extent of your agility.

It happens maybe once every two or three years, so infrequently that I can remember every time. All the important saves of my life.

I begin my story with the penalty I faced in the 4th Division State League grand final for Dartford Town – Dartford Town in Sydney, where I grew up.

* * *

We were one nil up with seconds to go, when the fast prick on the left (that right winger with the long blond hair) managed

to cut inside Dave Lennox and bore down on my goal from 35 yards, at an angle of 45 degrees. I'm always comfortable with that angle, so I could've murdered that idiot Lennox who chased the fast prick just far enough to trip him on the edge of the box. I fuckin' had it covered.

Obviously, Dave gets a red card, and I have to face a penalty. Ninety minutes up. Our older legs tiring and dreading the prospect of extra time.

The fast prick is gonna take it, but I can tell from the way he averts his eyes that he's trying not to look at his target.

That's the secret to saving penalties – knowing that a penalty taker will always look at the spot he wants to hit the ball. The trick, is learning to recognise the real look from the various decoy looks he'll try to sell you as he lines it up. There's just the tiniest nuance of difference in the way he glances at the real target. If you can learn to spot that difference, then you're more than halfway to making the save. All you have to worry about is whether he's good enough to put the ball, more or less, where you know he wants it to go.

The fast prick with the long, blond hair was good enough. I'd seen him glance at the top right corner, then drag his eyes away with an expression that would have endeared him to any poker player. If I knew my victim, he had already hypnotised himself and could no more miss the top right corner than fly through the air.

Well, fly through the air is exactly what I did. He was still a pace from the ball when I took off to my right – arcing my body like a high-jumper – and just got my outstretched palm to the pile-driven pill. It pinged off the crossbar and shot back into play as I slammed into the ground and bounced to my feet.

There was a great melee of players about the ball on the edge of the box, and then their great lummoX of a centre half ploughed the ball into space, as the whistle blew. And I fell backwards onto my arse in ecstasy.

Ecstasy that lasted for about half a second.

The fuckin' season was over.

* * *

Dave Lennox shook my hand for the 17th time as he returned from the bar, but then his face changed.

“Come outside, Eric. We need to talk.”

There's an intimacy to “going outside”; it means secrets. We all remember the various times we've been asked “outside” by women. It always means sex somehow. But in a football club, “outside” meant politics.

Dave was the captain and club president. He loved a whinge, but after winning a grand final I was more than happy to indulge him. We left the rollicking, beer-soaked fag-fume of the lounge bar at the Ghost Gum Hotel and wandered out onto the dark terrace where the cold and the wood smoke made me think of England – not that I'd ever been there.

“Man, that was a fuckin' great save, Eric,” he said for the 18th time. But his face was now strangely serious, as though he was no longer talking about the game.

“Thanks, Dave. I sure saved your arse.”

“Yeah, you did.”

He stared into his beer for a moment then, avoiding my eye, he said:

“Yeah, great save, Eric. But it was almost too good.”

“Eh?”

I was used to praise, and that day I'd had far more than my usual entitlement, but *too good*? Can there be such a thing?

"What the fuck are you on about?" I laughed, but I could tell that something was coming.

Dave stared at his beer some more, then looked up at me with pursed lips and said:

"Look Eric, I know you're still a top keeper, mate. It's just that we've got a couple of young blokes comin' through and . . . and unless we start to play 'em, we'll lose 'em."

I couldn't believe my ears. I'd thought he was gonna ask me to stand for club president or something (absolutely the worst job in any amateur football club).

"So what if we lose 'em," I sneered. "Aren't I still the best keeper in the club?"

Dave looked at me like I'd just stabbed him in the guts with a broken beer bottle, which was basically what I felt like doing after saving his blushes and winning the final for him.

"Yes you are, mate," he said, between clenched teeth. "You *are* the best keeper in the club, and that's the bloody problem. How much longer can it go on? You're 40 for chrissakes."

"I'm 39, Dave. I won't be 40 for weeks."

"You'll be pushing 41 by the start of next season."

"So? Pat Jennings was still playing at the top into his 40s. So was Neville Southall, Peter Shilton, Gordon Banks . . . Danny Malone. I'm still fit, Dave. If Calamity fuckin' James's still playin', then Eric Judd's got years left."

He had the grace to grin, but said:

"Piss off, Eric. You're comparing yourself with professionals. The cream of the cream . . . in England! And it's only the freaks who play into their 40s. Elite freaks who do nothing but train all their lives. They don't fuck their bodies carry-

ing fridges. You can't even kick since you did your ankle last time."

"I have a right to compare myself with professionals, Dave. I could've been one."

I didn't often pull out the big gun these days, but he'd asked for it. I was a legend at the club because in my youth I'd received an invitation to go to Old Trafford for a trial. The letter said that I could turn up whenever I was ready. And I still had that letter.

But suddenly Dave was no longer impressed.

"That was 25 years ago Eric, and you never went. You stayed here, and you've stayed too bloody long."

I might have belted him, as I'd belted plenty of others in my time – on and off the field in the name of justice. But at that moment Shona came out onto the balcony and I had to behave. Dave, of course, recognised an ally and immediately pressed his advantage.

"What do you reckon, Shona? Isn't it time yer ol' man hung up the boots?"

Shona had been my girlfriend for seven years, living with me for most of that time. She'd been my biggest fan in the past, but she'd been wanting me to retire for a while.

"He'll do what he wants, Dave," she said, with bored resignation. "He always has, he always will."

Something in her voice made me peer more closely at her sharp-featured face in the neon dark. I mean, she always had the shits these days, but it seemed to have cranked up a notch in the last half hour.

"Bloody football," she sneered.

She didn't deign to look at either of us, just carried on like a soliloquy in the dark. And just quietly, it sounded too well-rehearsed for my liking.

"Bloody football," she repeated. "Stupid, bloody football's

ruined his life. He could've been anything but he just frigged about the whole time doing crap jobs so he could have more time for football. Weekend comp, training, extra personal training, six-a-side, indoor, long weekend tournaments anywhere in the country, off-season training, pre-season training . . . ”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but she just powered over the top of me.

“Do you know how many times he’s been sacked from paying jobs because of football injuries, or getting into fights?” she asked, and I realised she was talking to Dave. “Nearly 20 times – just since *I’ve* known him! The only jobs he can get now are low paid physical torture like removals or carrying bricks. Then he comes home exhausted, broken and penniless, but he’s always right for bloody football.”

Dave was a trifle shell-shocked by her bitter onslaught, but he did his best to come to my rescue.

“Yeah, but he’s still yer ol’ man, Shona. You still love ‘im.”

Shona looked at Dave like he was a bloody idiot.

“Neither of his brothers played stupid football,” she continued. “They play golf and go skiing! But Eric’s been encouraged in this football lunacy his whole life by his halfwit Uncle Jimmy. At least *he* won’t be filling Eric’s head with crap and dreams anymore.”

It’s like I wasn’t even there.

“Okay, maybe it wasn’t so ridiculous when he was 16 . . . when he got that invitation to go to England. But he never did anything about it. He never saved up the fare because he never stopped playing stupid, bloody football long enough to earn some decent money.”

“Yeah, well thanks for the support, my beloved life partner and soul mate,” I said, as Dave shrank behind his glass and tried to back away from our tiff. “As a matter of fact, I’ve got heaps of money.”

Dave’s retreat was halted by his curiosity, and Shona turned to face me for the first time.

“Good ol’ Uncle Jimmy,” I explained, in answer to their unspoken question.

“Good ol’ Jimmy,” I repeated. “I didn’t want to mention it just yet, so close to his death – makes me feel a bit grasping.”

Shona’s rubber band was in definite danger of snapping.

“What are you talking about, Eric?” she asked me, perilously beautiful in the cold and dark.

“He’s erm – he’s left me some money.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I only got the letter yesterday – from the lawyers.”

“You’ve known 24 hours and it didn’t occur to you to tell me?”

Her voice had risen slightly in pitch and volume. The warning signals were flashing, but Dave was still hovering on the edge of the semi-darkness, wanting to respect our privacy but intrigued beyond the point of politeness.

“I had other things on my mind,” I explained, already aware of how bad this was about to get.

“What could be more important than a large amount of money?” she asked me, teeth bared – daring me to expose the full extent of my stupidity.

“The grand final,” I admitted. “I was too wrapped up in the GF to worry about money.”

She went strangely quiet, as Krakatoa may have done shortly

before splitting the planet wide open.

“How much did he leave you?” she asked, at last, her teeth gritted like an angry smile.

“Two hundred and forty-two thousand.”

“I see – a game of Z-grade football was more important to you than \$242,000?”

It was my last chance to salvage something from the situation but, like an idiot, I told the truth.

“Well at the time . . . yes!”

Her fist smacked into my mouth and I found myself falling arse backwards for the second time that day.

In the dreamy half-light, I never saw it coming.

My golden cloud

I’ve gotten off to a bad start by telling all this stuff about Shona. It makes it seem like we didn’t love each other, or she was wrong for me, or whatever. The truth was, we did love each other. At least, I loved her and I was reasonably certain she loved me back. She had too much time invested to want to give up on me now.

But money complicates relationships.

It’s bad enough having none. You get used to that, and you cope – united in poverty. But when the poverty vacuum suddenly fills with money, a couple is beset with choices and alternative paths appear which can sever the strongest of bonds.

With the inheritance had come a letter:

Eric Lad,

You’re the son I never had, so I’m leaving you my entire estate in the hope that you use it to finally get over to England to take up that offer at Man United. You have

a precious gift, and a sacred duty to share that gift with the world. At 35, you can't have too many years left at the top. So do it, Eric. Do it now!
Love from Beyond the Grave,
Jimmy

Thirty-five? Must've written it a few years back.

Anyway, all of this went through my mind as I lay on the tiles in the beer garden, trying not to laugh. The next thing I knew, Shona was covering me with kisses and laughing and crying and saying she was sorry.

Then Dave was pissing himself, and I was pissing myself, but when I tried to get up off the floor this godalmighty flash of pain ripped through my lower back.

"Jesus fuck!" I shouted, and Shona stared at me in guilty horror.

"What've you done, Eric? What've I done?"

"It's okay. Must've landed awkwardly. *Fuck!*"

Another spasm of pain shot through my lower spine as I attempted, once again, to get to my feet.

"Shit! My back's totally fucked. I can't move."

"Lie still," said Dave, pushing me flat on my back. "Can you wiggle your toes?"

I did better than that. I raised my knees and tried to press them against my chest, but the pain in my lower back was searing.

"Aaah . . . fuck it!"

"Sorry, Eric," said Shona, tears streaking her make-up. "I'm so sorry."

"We'd better get him to hospital," sighed Dave.
What a way to spend Grand Final night.

* * *

I lay in a warm, fluffy cloud, suffused in a golden glow.

Shona and Dave were laughing and chatting, but after the Pethidine, my conversation skills were a bit sub par. I just lay back on my cloud, tuning in every now and then.

It was good of Dave to stay so long. He was missing Grand Final night himself, but he seemed happy enough laughing and chatting with Shona. I suppose I should've mentioned the money earlier, but I hadn't quite gotten over Jimmy's death yet. And I felt unclean swapping Jimmy for money.

I've never known anyone who loved the game like Jimmy. He was still playing in his sixties and it was only dodgy knees that forced him to give the game away. I'll never forget the night that he finally accepted the fact he had played his last game. He wasn't emotional, he just talked quietly about Stanley Matthews, and how he'd still been playing professionally in his fifties.

"You're never too old, lad," he'd muttered in his soft Geordie accent, wincing in occasional pain. "You don' stop playin' joos 'cause soom fooker says you're too old. There's summat we get from football we can't get from anythin' else...an' yer a long time retired."

He didn't hang up his new boots, though. He gave them to me. He'd only worn them a couple of times – top of the line professional screw-ins with three sets of studs for different conditions. I always preferred moulded myself so I'd never worn them.

I smiled, returning from my golden cloud as Shona laughed at one of Dave's jokes.

Jimmy had always trained me until I'd made my first rep

team. I'd loved playing in goal from the start, but Jimmy had forced me to play in two teams at once for several years – keeper in one team, striker in the other to learn what strikers were up against – how they went about the business of scoring goals. And I *did* enjoy scoring goals, but it wasn't the same as keeping 'em out. A keeper's an individual.

But playing up front had given me some insights which helped get me selected in a series of rep teams in my early teens, and by the age of 16 I was playing 1st Division State League for Kuringai. This culminated in an offer to trial with Man Utd:

15 October

Eric Judd

42 Dutch Way

Wahroonga

Dear Eric,

We've read the recommendation from our scout in Australia (Mr Warren). We would be prepared to give you a trial if you can get yourself to Manchester.

Come as soon as you are ready, and bring this letter with you.

Yours sincerely,

John Argyle

Youth Team Coach

Manchester United FC

The 15th of October was my birthday. It seemed like an omen.

About a month later, the day I was to pay for my ticket to England, I'd finished work early and was racing through one of the local parks to get to the shopping centre at Hornsby,

where the travel agent was . . .

It's hard to think about what happened next.

I didn't play football for a couple of years, and I could have played at the highest level in Australia. No doubts about that. But I just wanted to play with the mates who'd looked after me. We started out playin' Premier League in the Gladesville-Hornsby comp. Then a couple of years later, the nucleus of the team had moved to Dartford Town, a small club in the lower reaches of the New South Wales State League. We won promotion most years, but we never made it out of 2nd Division into the State Super League. After a couple of years in the 2nd Division, I was the only one left of the original bunch of mates who'd all fallen by the wayside due to work, family, injury or the simple facts of time. At 30, I was part of the furniture and oblivious to the needs of Manchester United (who seemed to be doing alright without me). I just kept playing.

Mr Cleansheets, they called me. At six foot two, I was the perfect height and build for a keeper; big enough to dominate the box, but not too big to get down quickly. Jimmy always said it was my reflexes that set me apart – that, and my ability to read the game and be in the right place at the right time. The non-goalkeeping public always think of the flashy, agile keepers when identifying their favourites. Only a goalkeeper knows that the real skill lies in anticipation, positioning and timing. The perfect performance by a keeper could, in theory, involve no diving at all. But as I've said before, just catching a ball does not compare with diving full length and tipping it round for a corner.

Yeah. Manchester United.

I didn't even follow United, to tell the truth. I'd always divided my affections between Arsenal, Newcastle and Hibs,

but United (at least in terms of revenue) were the biggest club in the world. It wouldn't be bad to give up carrying fridges and pianos and just play football – especially if that's what Jimmy wanted.

I found myself staring at Shona, dimly aware that the drugs were making me stupid.

“Shona...”

She broke from her animated discussion with Dave, and her face changed as she remembered my plight.

“How are you feeling, Eric?”

“I'm gonna play for Manchester United.”

Dave laughed out loud, but Shona turned white. She knew me better than he did.