



ROCKY RACE'S ABILITY to predict the future had been improving in recent months.

It was weird, but it also made perfect sense. Since she'd started playing in a proper organised football team, she understood the game of football much better. So much so, she could imagine what was going to happen next, or even, the two or three things that might happen from any one moment in the game. And the more Rocky Race played the game at a high level, the more naturally that understanding came to her.

Rocky studied her captain Ffion Guthrie's

position on the pitch, as the ball came looping over the centre circle towards her. Rocky was so single-minded about the game it was like there was nothing else going on in the world – in her life – other than the trajectory of the ball. Football was an obsession for her. A passion.

In her state of 100% focus, Rocky foresaw the game's future once she took control of the ball.



Ffion would drift wide, finding space on the far touchline.

Rocky would play in a high ball, too high for Ffion to control with her feet or chest, so Ffion would rise above all the challengers from the surprised Hebden FC players, head it back to Rocky, who would now be unmarked in the centre circle. Then Ffion would sprint between two out-of-position defenders towards the goal, just as Rocky slid a perfectly-weighted pass in to her.

Sowerby Football Club were the best women's team in Melchester and the county beyond. This was thanks, in no small part, to the partnership of Ffion Guthrie and Rocky Race, their two star players.

Sowerby had enjoyed an astonishing season in which, coming from nothing, they'd risen to find themselves part of the football pyramid – a structure of leagues

that led directly to the WPL, the English Women's Premier League.

In addition, amid the unpredictable chaos that is football, they had somehow managed to land a top-class coach: Johnny 'The Hardman' Dexter; one-time captain and hero of the local men's team, Melchester Rovers. One-time England international.

Rocky watched as her pass soared high, then Ffion rose, beating a defender who was trying to pull her shirt to stop her leaping. The ball ricocheted off Ffion's head, falling to Rocky's feet.

Perfect. As planned. Rocky felt a burst of adrenaline that she channelled into what she needed to do next. Onto it, with a sudden explosion of speed and power, Rocky was still shoulder-to-shoulder with a stocky Hebden midfielder whilst simultaneously tracking Ffion's run.

Three...

Two...

One...

Rocky side-footed the ball as Ffion broke away past the Hebden defence and, one-on-one with the keeper, slotted the ball home.

GOAL!

Perfectly slotted away by a footballer at the top of her game.



Hebden 0-4 Sowerby.

Normally Rocky would have gone to celebrate the goal with her captain. But she was on the ground, staring back at the sky. The midfielder she'd run parallel with had hit her hard, but not until she'd played the ball.

After punching the air and letting out a wild cheer, Rocky rolled over as the referee strode towards the offending Hebden player, who was being pushed by Charlotte Duncan and Nadiya Hussain, two of Rocky's more combative teammates.

Rocky could predict what would happen now too.

The ref would stop, thrust a yellow card at the Hebden player – then, after an exquisite pause, pull a red card out. The Hebden player would shout a rude word, then storm off, giving Rocky a dark look as she left the pitch.

Rocky sat up to watch.

Yellow card.

Red card.

Off.

Swear word.

Dark look.

In a way Rocky took the Hebden player's sending off as more meaningful than the 4-0 scoreline. Wasn't it good if the player who was been assigned to mark you got sent off? Rocky thought so. She was pleased to note that it was the third time it had happened this season.

Rocky's secret desire was to have two players sent off in one game because of her. Now *that* would be really satisfying.

Or would it?

Was it *kind* to want your opponents to be so bamboozled by your ballplay that they were ordered off before the end of the game? Rocky smiled. There was no room

for worrying about kindness on the football pitch. Off it, maybe. But, on it, for Rocky Race, football was all about winning. Fairly. Or as close to fairly as you could get.

‘On your feet, Race,’ came the shout. ‘Or are you mortally wounded? Or daydreaming?’

Rocky heard the booming voice of her coach, Johnny Dexter, chiding her.

He was right, of course. What *was* she doing? The game had fifteen minutes left and there she was – taking a rest, daydreaming, like he said – when she should be back in position, giving it anything and everything to not concede a goal.

Shortly after kick-off. she realised that the game was changing: Hebden had started to get more of the ball and events were taking part increasingly in Sowerby’s half.

Johnny Dexter’s booming voice came at the team again.

‘Keep the clean sheet!’ he bellowed. ‘Stop coasting. I want to see one hundred per cent commitment.’

Rocky glanced over at Coach. Johnny Dexter stood there, next to a woman in a tracksuit that Rocky had never seen before. Coach did not look happy. Rocky felt all her adrenaline and elation drain away. She shivered. Drew a deep, steadying breath. This game wasn’t over. There was no way they were going to concede a goal and disappoint Coach.

Hebden were firing in high long balls, hoping for a slice of luck or a Sowerby mistake. Presumably they thought that if they did it five or six times they’d get a break, or at least a shot on goal.

Rocky was forced to play deeper. And deeper. No more feeding Ffion from central midfield, now she was a defender. And it

frustrated her. Because Rocky believed that the best way of defending was attacking. If your opposition are defending, how can they attack you? It was simple. She'd heard Vic – Ffion's brother – say that once. And, although she would never admit it to anyone in the world, she looked up to Vic Guthrie.

He was tough.

He was uncompromising.

But he was the last person she wanted to be compared to at the moment. Maybe before. She would have liked to be compared to him before. But not now.

Now, another Hebden high ball causing a scramble in the penalty area. Rocky on the eighteen yard line, a Hebden striker arrowing in with no marker to tackle her and crucially Lily Halifax, the Sowerby keeper, off her line, stranded.

An open goal.

Only one way to stop it.
Block.

With another explosion of adrenaline, Rocky threw herself down, full-length, in front of the ball as the Hebden striker lined up her shot. And – in slower than slow motion – Rocky saw the underside of her boot coming at her head.

Then she heard a crack.