



ROY RACE READ in a magazine that to be really good at something you have to practice doing it 10,000 times.

Ten.

Thousand.

Times.

Inspired by what he'd read, Roy had dedicated his summer holidays to working on his footballing weakness, something he wanted to make into a footballing strength.

Volleying.

And now the moment had come for the practice to pay off.



Sunday morning in mid-September. Time for the first game of the season, which was always a big game. But, for Roy, it was an even bigger game. Today Roy was making his debut for the Grimroyd Under-18s.

The Moor had once been wild heather-smothered moorland above Melchester, Roy's home city. Now it was half a dozen waterlogged football pitches, where every autumn, the eight teams who used the pitches as their home ground played out a pre-season cup competition.

There was even a trophy. The Moor Cup.
Round one. Grimroyd v Low Moor.

Within minutes of kick off Roy realised that practicing alone in his back yard had been poor preparation for playing against the city's eighteen-year-olds. His coach – Yunis Khan – had told him to play up front, just behind the main striker. Coach wanted Roy to receive the ball, back to goal, then play the midfielders in as they surged forward.

That was the plan. On paper.
On the pitch it was different.

The first time Roy did what he was asked he felt a painful jab in his back and found himself on the floor. The second time, his defender went straight through him. Roy stood up, dusted himself down and looked up into the eyes of the six-foot-three giant who was marking him.

‘You’re out of your depth, sunshine,’ the giant growled.

Roy smiled at the defender, noticing his arms were thicker than Roy’s legs.

One chance, Roy said to himself. *I just need one chance to show you I’m not.*

Roy Race wasn’t the only one being hammered that morning on the pitch. His friend, Lofty Peak, was being punished too. And there was reason for that: Lofty had been on the books of the city’s Premier League team, Tynecaster United, since the age of six. But, at the end of last season, he’d been

released. Lofty's history – and the fact that he was six-foot-five – made him a marked man, with everyone desperate to prove they were better than him. Which was why Lofty was on the grass writhing in agony after an elbow to the throat.

Half time arrived. Roy gazed out across the other council pitches. Rusty goal posts with ragged nets. An old man with his dog, watching the action. Roy knew him. The man was Fred. The dog, Rover. A regular on the Moor.

‘This is tough,’ Roy said, his attention back on Lofty.

His friend looked miserable. ‘Get used to it,’ he scowled. ‘It’s part of the game. They’re bigger than you. They’ve got more muscle. They’ll use it, however good a player you are.’

Roy and Lofty trudged to the side of the

pitch and slumped on the grass, waiting for Yunis to give his half-time talk.

‘So that elbow in the neck was just part of the game?’ Roy asked.

‘It was,’ Lofty said, gingerly touching his skin where a bruise was forming.

Suddenly a shadow blocked out the sun. But it wasn’t a cloud. It was Vinny Sampson, the Grimroyd team captain. Vinny looked like he was in his late twenties, even though he was only eighteen. His eyes had something wild about them.

‘Boys,’ Vinny growled. ‘You two might think you’re all grown up now you’re in my team, but you’re playing like five-year-olds. Get it together, understand?’

Roy nodded.

Vinny walked off, shaking his head and muttering something about kids. Roy thought again about his defender and how he

could prove the defender and Vinny wrong.

Yunis' team talk was short and clear, given with a mysterious grin on his face. They were playing well, he said. The game was tight. Games like this were decided by one goal and one mistake. Yunis urged the players keep positive – and not make that mistake.

Then he told them the reason he was smiling.

‘I’ve had some great news,’ he said. ‘Great news for you. The kind of news that could change your life. I’ll tell you more after the match, but do your best to win this, then the news could be even better.’

Roy took what Lofty had said on board in the second half. He got stuck in, ran hard at the defence, gave every pass, tackle and aerial challenge one hundred per cent. He was intrigued by what Yunis had said. What

did he mean when he said news that could change their lives?

The only goal of the game was from a corner. Roy ran in from the edge of the area to try to connect to midfielder Dave Brayley's corner, but the menacing defender, who had been tracking him all game, guided Roy away from the ball with his shoulder. The ball skimmed off the defender's head but then, appearing as if from out of nowhere, Lofty was in on it, his forehead directing the ball through the keeper's flailing arms.

GOAL!

Grimroyd 1 – 0 Low Moor.

Roy smiled and caught the eye of his defender. The Low Moor giant looked angry and Roy didn't want to make him any angrier. But Roy knew he'd played a part in the goal – and that the defender knew that too. He'd pulled the defender out of position,

caused him to make a rash header. And the goal came from that. It wasn't a volley, but that didn't matter to Roy.

When the referee blew for full-time, Roy tramped off the pitch and stood with the other players. The aftermath of the match felt strange to Roy. In the Under-16s team he had been the star player, the match winner, the player everyone mobbed at the end of the game to say well done. It was very different today. Roy didn't feel confident enough to look his teammates in the eye. He wasn't even sure he'd done enough even to justify keeping his place in the team. He'd been out-muscled and out-thought. He had a lot of learning to do.

But none of that seemed to bother Yunis. He was grinning from ear to ear.

'Gather round, lads,' Yunis said. 'Well done. Now listen. Here's the big news...'