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'Wow!'

'Cool!'

'Wick-ed!'

The brand-new football shirt, held up by Mr Davies, received the loud approval of his team. In their only game so far, Bad Boyz had played in a strip borrowed from their school. Now, for their first match in the Appleton Little League, they were to play in their very own kit. The shirt displayed by the manager even had the team's name emblazoned across it in big black letters: **BAD BOYZ**. It also bore the name of their sponsors: the Doorstep Dairy.

'Max's dad has done us proud,' said Mr Davies as he handed round the new shirts. Max's dad was a milkman with the Doorstep Dairy and he'd managed to persuade his employers to pay for his son's team's strip. The dairy's chairman was a keen football fan and liked to support local ventures.

‘We’re gonna look like Brazil!’ said Dareth, the Bad Boyz captain, holding his shirt up in front of his chest. The shirt was a bright custard yellow.

‘Yeah!’ squeaked Andrew, alias Bloomer, the smallest member of the team. His shirt hung down almost to his knees.

‘Hey, look, Bloomer’s got his nightie on,’ laughed Jordan, the team’s only girl.

‘Just as long as he doesn’t go to sleep in the game,’ said Mr Davies pointedly.

Bloomer was famous for his tiny attention span. It frequently got him into detention at school – where, in the past at least, he had regularly been joined by the rest of the team. It wasn’t for nothing that they were called Bad Boyz.

When they were dressed, Mr Davies called them round for a team talk. He glanced around to check they were all there: Dareth, Sadiq, Jordan, Bloomer, Sung-Woo, Kyle....

‘Max!’ he called. ‘Where are you?’

Right on cue, Max appeared from the toilet – wearing his dark blue shorts on his head.

‘You called, master?’ he boomed, as if he were

a genie summoned from a magic lamp. The others laughed.

‘Max,’ Mr Davies sighed, ‘put your shorts on your backside and let’s get this show on the road. We’ve got a match to play.’

Max bowed low. ‘Yes, master,’ he intoned. He took the shorts off his head, grinning hugely.

Finally, all the team were fully dressed and ready for action.

‘Right,’ said Mr Davies. ‘This is a big day for us, isn’t it?’

‘Mmm.’ There was a general murmur of agreement.

‘We’ve come a long way in the last couple of months,’ the coach continued. ‘Now we’ve reached our goal. We’re going to play in the little league. Well, you are, anyway. I’ll just be watching from the sidelines. I’ve done my bit, now it’s up to you.’ He paused to glance around the semicircle of children in front of him. His mind returned to that day in early spring when, fed up with seeing the same seven children in detention all the time, he’d suggested the idea of forming them into a football team. Now, here

they were, looking every centimetre a team in their new yellow and blue strip...

A loud fart brought these fond thoughts to a sudden end. There were groans of disgust.

'Kyle!' Sadiq accused.

Kyle, the team's goalkeeper, was a picture of wobbly innocence.

'Me?' he protested. He frowned so hard, his small eyes almost disappeared into his pale face like raisins into a bowl of porridge.

'I didn't do nuffing! It was Sung-Woo.'

'I think we'd better get out in the open,' said Mr Davies, 'before we're all gassed.'

His players needed no second invitation. At once, the room echoed with the sound of studs tapping and clumping their way across the wooden floor.

Only Sung-Woo remained. His face, as ever, bore a serious, slightly baffled expression.

'Is no gas,' he said gravely. 'Is just my bottom. I have too many beans for breakfast. Beans make you f -'

'Yes, thanks, Sung-Woo,' Mr Davies interjected. 'It's your feet I'm interested in. Now,

off you go and get kicking that ball. I want to see some goals from you today.' Sung-Woo was the team's striker.

'Yes, sir,' he said – and he almost smiled.

2

Bad Boyz first opponents were Vinnie's Vulcans. They were already out on the pitch in their green and white shirts and green shorts. They were practising their shooting when Bad Boyz ran out of the changing room. A small ginger-haired boy flicked a ball into the air and volleyed a shot past his keeper, high into the back of the net.

'He looks all right,' said Dareth appreciatively.

'Nah,' said Kyle. 'I'd've saved that easy.' He stretched out a meaty arm, miming a save.

'You'd never have got near it, you big jelly,' said Sadiq. He and Kyle often had a go at each other. In the past at school their arguments had frequently led to blows and, later, detention. Since Bad Boyz had come together, though, they'd managed to get on – most of the time.

'You don't know nuffing,' Kyle huffed.

Mr Davies arrived just in time. 'Hey, you're on the same side, you two,' he chided. 'You'll

boost the other team's confidence if they see you arguing among yourselves. Now let's get warmed up....'

Warming-up was Bad Boyz least favourite activity and they always met its announcement with a collective grumble. But Mr Davies insisted on it. Before their twice-weekly training sessions and now before this first match against the Vulcans they went through a rigorous routine of bends, stretches, jogs, jumps and sprints. Only then did they get to kick a ball around.

They divided in half, forming two straight lines with the front players, Dareth and Sadiq, facing each other. Mr Davies threw Dareth a ball and the exercise started. Dareth passed the ball to Sadiq then sprinted across to the back of the opposite line. Sadiq trapped the ball and passed to the new front player in the other line, Sung-Woo. Then Sadiq sprinted to the back of the opposite line. And so it went on, until everyone had received and passed the ball five times.

After that they practised shooting. Again they stood in a line. This time the front player

was Jordan. She passed to Mr Davies, who was standing midway between her and Kyle in goal. Mr Davies tapped the ball to his left, while Jordan ran on and shot first time. The ball whizzed wide – much to Kyle’s amusement.

‘You wanna get some glasses, Jordan,’ he laughed.

‘You want to get a brain, Kyle,’ Jordan retorted.

‘Just get the ball, Jordan,’ said Mr Davies.

Kyle was good at this exercise and very difficult to beat. He wasn’t the most agile of keepers, but he made full use of his size to block the shots that were on target. He let in only a couple of goals from the many shots fired at him.

‘It’s like trying to get past the Incredible Hulk,’ moaned Sadiq, as Kyle pulled off yet another comfortable save.

‘Well, let’s hope the Vulcans feel like that too,’ said Mr Davies. ‘I don’t want any silly goals going in our end. Let’s try to keep a clean sheet. OK, Max?’

‘Sir!’ Max shouted, raising his hand to his

head in a military salute. Then he toppled sideways to the ground.

Mr Davies smiled. Max loved to clown around now, but when the whistle blew for the match to start he'd be the most competitive player on the pitch. It was a transformation that never ceased to amaze all those who knew him.

And just at that moment, the whistle did indeed blow for the captains to go to the centre circle for the toss of the coin. Dareth walked forward for Bad Boyz and the ginger-haired boy for Vinnie's Vulcans. The referee introduced himself, then asked the two captains to shake hands.

'Right, who's going to call?' he asked.

'I will,' said the ginger-haired boy quickly. He called 'heads'. It was.

'We'll have kick-off,' he said. 'Which end do you want?'

'We'll stay as we are,' said Dareth. He grinned. 'Our keeper don't like to move much.'

The ginger-haired boy looked past Dareth to where Kyle was sitting on his goal-line. Then he grinned too. 'Don't worry,' he sneered. 'All he'll

have to do is turn round ... to pick the ball out of the net.'

Dareth shook his head. 'He don't like to do that neither,' he said.

The other boy snorted. 'Sounds like he doesn't like to do anything.'

'Yeah, he does,' Dareth contradicted him. 'He likes to squash ginger nuts.'

With that he turned and walked back to take up his place for the kick-off.