

The Yank Striker's Journey

Book 2 in *The Yank Striker Series*

By Jason Liegois

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I dedicate this book to all the writers
who encouraged me to keep going with
my craft, and to Laura for encouraging
me in that and everything else.

ISBN: 978-1-62249-xxx-x

Published by
Biblio Publishing
Columbus, Ohio
BiblioPublishing.com

Author's Notes

Several of the sporting teams and clubs mentioned in this narrative, such as Donford Football Club and Hamptonshire Rovers Football Club of soccer, and Hamilton State University and the New York Goliaths of American football, are entirely fictional, as are their affiliated teams, players, and staff, and are not intended to represent any existing organizations.

Although several existing football clubs, both soccer and gridiron, appear within these pages, their depictions here, as well as the depictions of their players and staff, are entirely fictional and not intended to accurately represent their true-to-life counterparts.

Acknowledgements

First, to any I forget to acknowledge here, thank you.

I want to thank my beta readers. First among them are Maggie Rivers and Samantha Walker, whom I first met as members of the late, great, Iowa Writer's Corner group based in Des Moines, Iowa. They have been valuable writing resources for me as well as support. I was also delighted to have my daughter, Madeline Liegois, as another member of the beta team, so special thanks to her here.

I want to thank my longtime friend and fellow writer Misty Urban for her invaluable help in the revision and editing process. I was glad to have a writer of her caliber behind the editing wheel, so to speak.

I want to thank Joe Boardman of the Boardman Group for his cover design; it turned out far better than I could have imagined it.

Thanks to Biblio Publishing of Columbus, Ohio (home of one of the original teams in Major League Soccer, the Columbus Crew) for their help in bringing this book and series to life, in particular Robert Sims and Fran Weiss for their work.

Finally, I want to thank my family, including Madeline, my son Jacob Liegois, and my parents William and Suzanne Liegois for their love and support throughout the years. Lastly, special thanks go to my wife, Laura Liegois, for supporting and encouraging my writing. My love goes out to you all.

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“I do hope nobody is stupid enough to write us off.”

- Brian Clough (1935-2004) English football manager (Nottingham Forrest), twice winner of the English first division and two-time European Cup winner, said regarding his team's chances in the 1979 European Cup tournament. (They won.)

“I can't believe it. Football, bloody hell.”

- Sir Alex Ferguson (1941-) Scottish football manager (Manchester United), 13-time English Premier League winner and two-time UEFA Champions League winner, said after winning the 1999 Champions League final in extra time.

Chapter 1

Leicestershire, East Midlands, England December

It was going to be a long trip back to London.

Daniel John Ryan, known as DJ by most everyone, reviewed Google Maps as the first team of Donford Football Club left the stadium in Leicester and started heading down the M1 southeast toward London. Two hours and fifteen minutes at least. Fuck's sake, he thought, watching the gray factories of the Midlands and the brown and tan farm fields fly by as flurries continued to fall but not quite stick to the ground.

It had not been the best league game for Donford FC, the pride of the East End of London, the Sea Dragons. The score at the end was Leicester City 2-1 Donford, leaving the London club just four points above the relegation places before Christmas. DJ had not gotten on the field during the entire game, which had been an unfamiliar situation when he was growing up outside of Dallas.

He had known nobody within a thousand-mile radius for more than a few months. Earlier in the year, he was still around his parents, his brother, and later his mother and her partner. DJ had plenty of acquaintances, if not friends, and family around Dallas. But now he was virtually alone, on the bus of a team he'd barely heard of by the start of the year, playing a sport he loved but hadn't expected to be making a living at, especially in the English Premier League.

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He had a chance to play football after high school, the gridiron kind, for his father John Daniel “Junior” Ryan, the national championship winning coach for the Hamilton State University Copperheads. But a twist of fate had DJ tooling around England playing soccer rather than American football for his dad and with his brother Trey, a quarterback and Heisman Award candidate this year. Now, rather than family, he was surrounded by strangers on his team, who ranged from friendly to tolerant of his presence. It was time to try and reach out and make a few friends.

He saw one of the latter a few seats in front of him. Lazlow Papp, who most of his teammates had taken to calling Laz, was a solid brick of a kid, maybe two inches shorter than DJ’s six-foot four frame but two inches wider in the shoulders. At twenty years of age, he was a center back for Donford, the next-to-last line of defense before the keeper. He’d been active throughout the entire game, managing to keep three shots out of the net when Red, their goalie, was either out of position or behind him. He’d already played for the Hungarian national football team, and many considered him to be one of the better young defenders in the Premier League.

Although Laz spoke English well enough, he’d never gone out of his way to talk to DJ. From what he’d heard and observed, Laz was an observant Catholic, even to the point of wearing a rosary and, as he was now, reading a leather-bound copy of the Bible on the drive back to London. DJ wondered if Laz’s faith had something to do with his aloofness toward him.

“I don’t know about this,” DJ sighed as he glanced over to his seatmate.

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"Go on," said his nearby teammate, Alexander "Lexx" Rodrigo Dos Santos Dias. "He's sure to be by himself for Christmas. He'll appreciate it, trust me."

"All right," he said. He got up, walked up the aisle, and stuck his head over Laz's seat.

"That the NIV version of the Bible?" DJ asked, intentionally playing up the Texas twang in his voice and smiling. He tried to be open and friendly. DJ had a face with sharp features, but he had eyes that were so intensely light blue as to be almost white. One of his former partners had called them 'cult-leader eyes,' and DJ realized staring at people was more than a little intimidating. Although it could be of help on the football pitch in intimidating opponents, he wanted to be more approachable otherwise.

"I remember that book," DJ continued as Laz glanced quizzically up at him. "That's the book of John, right? Unfortunately, the only thing I got out of it was Jesus' disciples had no idea how metaphors worked."

"You read this, being atheist?" Laz scoffed as he held the book up into the air.

"How do you think I got to be an atheist?" DJ whispered into his ear. "But anyway, I don't care to de-convert you. I wanted to invite you to my party coming up."

"Party?"

"You know Christmas is coming?" DJ said. "I know we have a game on Boxing Day, but the day before we can relax. I'm inviting a whole bunch of players to my flat on Christmas Day to hang out. Lexx will be there, Gord, Jojo ... a lot of the guys who don't have family right here in town. I wanted them to have a nice time."

"Surprised that you didn't mention Davy Boy." That was the nickname for David Campbell, the young backup goalie from Scotland who had become friends with DJ.

"He's not going to be part of the eighteen on Boxing Day," DJ said, "so Coach let him go to Aberdeen to see his family. It's the first time he'll see them on Christmas in three years. Anyway, come on over to my place. We'll have a big English breakfast, we'll have a big American Christmas dinner, and you can stay over if you want—I've got plenty of extra space. If you want to invite a guest with you, go ahead. I'd like to see you there."

Laz shook his head as he closed his Bible and set it upon his lap, folding his hands on top. "I'm not sure I'd fit in with what you have planned. I'm ... not the most entertaining of people."

DJ clapped his hand on Laz's shoulder, letting the smile come from his eyes. He somehow had a way of convincing people to go along with what he wanted. Maybe I would have been a cult leader in another life, he thought.

"Come *on*," he said, whispering in Laz's right ear, "what do you have to lose? It's tough being here on your own without family. I'm here in London by myself, no moms, no brother, not even my dad, which says a lot, if you knew *him*."

With a sigh, Laz nodded. "You said I could bring someone? It wouldn't get too crowded there?"

"Brother, you will not believe how much space I have at this apartment," DJ said. "I've got four bedrooms with a kitchen that could serve a restaurant. Most of the time I'm stir crazy in there by myself. You'd be doing me a favor."

"Thought you weren't alone most evenings, no judgment," Laz replied.

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"Don't believe the rumors," DJ responded, not breaking his smile. "Anyways, you coming, Laz?"

Laz relaxed despite himself. "All right, I'll be there," he said. "What time?"

"Well, I figured we're going to start cooking breakfast around seven that morning."

"Seven then," Laz said, and returned to the Book of John as DJ took his leave.

#

"Did he say yes?" DJ heard as he returned to his seat in the middle of the bus and on the left-hand side.

"Yup," he said as he sat next to Lexx, his teammate and roommate on the road. "Figured he would, but ... he can get prickly sometimes. I mean, he's been here at the club nearly a year, but from everything I see around here, he only talks to anyone on the training ground or during games. Not even in the dressing room. Now, he not only said he'd be there, but he's claimed he'd bring someone with. More than what I'll be doing anyway."

"I told you he'd be open to it." There was that blinding smile from his teammate, the thousand-watt one that forced people to be in a better mood. "It's just tougher for him here in England compared to some of the other lads. I mean, who else speaks Hungarian around here? Anyway, I'm looking forward to it."

"Of course you would, you're happy to meet everyone," DJ told Lexx.

Lexx was a perpetually sunny young man, eighteen years old like DJ, but was a study in contrasts to his new friend. Lexx was 5'7" and a modest 170 pounds, well-muscled and toned, but DJ towered over him even while sitting. Now 6'4" and 220 pounds, he was arguably the largest player on

the team except for Davy. Lexx's straight black hair, kept short but not crew-cut like DJ, almost shone from the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows to his left. He had deep wide dark eyes, a face that was reminiscent of an elf's, and a light coffee complexion. There were plenty of female fans who seemed to really like him, even though everyone knew he was gay. As for the young male fans ... some of them could be obsessive.

"That's all right. I like to meet people. Why not?"

"Of course, you would," DJ chuckled. "Don't worry, I'm at peace being Scotty Pippin to your Michael Jordan."

It was something of a joke between them, but also a slight tension as well. DJ knew a Premier League team, even a lower-level team like Donford, might not have taken a chance on him because he'd never played at any level above semi-professional teams around the Dallas area where he'd grown up. However, Donford considered Lexx one of the great secret talents in football—he'd gotten used to using that term more often rather than soccer—and they thought it might be useful if he had a teammate who was LGBTQ like he was. As Donford happened to discover, DJ considered himself bisexual or pansexual, depending on his mood.

It had been a constant struggle to get the coaches and more established teammates to trust that he could play, that he wasn't just some add-on to keep a potential star content. He had just managed to convince *himself* that he could perform alongside everyone.

The fact was, he hadn't planned on trying out with Donford. He'd had other plans of going to the Dallas-area Hamilton State University where his father had already won one national title and several conference championships, and now seemed poised to secure a second

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title with Trey leading the offense at quarterback. DJ could have helped their efforts as a high-school All-American receiver.

But a fateful encounter—*a case of sexual harassment, might as well call it that*—from his university's closeted athletic director who had thought DJ wanted to remain in the closet as well made him realize differently. It also made him realize he wanted to find his own path, separate from his family. It was just a trick of fate—and his love for soccer—that set him along this new path, but his dad and brother were chugging along fine without him, as he had predicted to Trey before he left for London.

Slowly but surely, DJ was working to try and get a chance at first team play. But at the game they'd just attended, even Lexx had just been on the bench and not used, even though he always impressed on Donford's training grounds. DJ hadn't even made it to the team roster that game and sat there with the rest of the reserves. "A work in progress," Lexx always said.

"Pardon me for being impatient," DJ grumbled. "I'm itching to get out on the field and prove I'm worth all this interest. I'm the guy most people don't want to defend, other than you, of course. They hate marking you."

"The time will come, DJ," Lexx said. "For a long time, I thought it wasn't going to happen to me, because of being blacklisted in Brazil. Now I'm closer to the dream than ever."

"Yeah," I can see that," DJ mumbled, Lexx's words catching him short. The blacklist had meant that Lexx had bounced around lower league clubs in Brazil for three years as a teenager, never able to play under his real name and identity after he'd been outed, a result of his romance with the son of the country's football federation. The young man,

Cadu, had unfortunately passed away by his own hand after his father had shipped him away to some evangelical gay reeducation camp—concentration camp was the better description, he thought— and Lexx was still getting over it. DJ couldn't picture being blacklisted for three years like some latter-day Shoeless Joe Jackson and was amazed how Lexx had seemed to let it all roll over him.

"Also, look at it this way," Lexx said. "This way, nobody can say you were successful because of your father or so on. That's got to feel good."

DJ had to nod at that, all things considered. He was trying to make his mark in a totally different sport in a country where barely anyone had heard of his father and brother and the few who had expected DJ to suddenly crack during a game and try and catch a ball with his hands during a football match.

"There's times I have no idea what Coach thinks of me I mean, he's not telling me I suck, but it's just tough getting a read on him, a read on my situation. I know Clive and the front office supports us, but I'm sure that only goes so far," DJ said, referring to Donford's director of football, Clive Mathers.

"Wait a minute," Lexx said. "Your father was a coach, right? How would you approach him if you had a question about where you stood with him?"

DJ stared southeast as they continued to roll down the M1, the woods and the farmlands flashing by. "He'd want it to be direct," DJ whispered. "No whining, no complaining, just direct questions about where I stood and where I was going."

Lexx nodded and patted him on the knee. "I think you have your answer. Ready for the Portuguese lessons?"

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"Sure, we got a while, right?" Lexx had been informally tutoring DJ in his native language to pass the time on road trips. Both knew Spanish, Lexx from private tutoring and DJ from hanging out with the native Spanish-speaking kids he played gridiron and football with back home in Texas. DJ joked that Lexx's English was better than his own, so he had to keep up.

Chapter 2

Standwood Training Ground, East London

Tuesday, three days later, DJ was in front of his wall, keeping the ball up.

It was a high brick wall at the back of the main first team building at Standwood, the training ground for Donford FC. It was several miles from their East End home ground of Rodman Park, just inside the M25 motorway. Standwood spread out over eighty acres of land, surrounding the four main buildings containing the first team facilities, the under-23 reserves and women's team, the youth academy training facilities, and the medical and sports science building. It was here, up on the right wing of the first team building, where a lone DJ was bouncing a ball back and forth against the wall, never letting it hit the ground, for a minimum of five hundred touches per round. He'd already dressed in his training gear, at least an hour before almost any of the other first team members arrived for training.

Almost. He saw Lexx behind him, somehow managing to juggle a ball up in the air with his feet, knees, head, and shoulders, after he exited the main building and ambled thirty yards toward the wall.

"Showoff," DJ huffed as he kept at his work, moving from one foot to another and then to his head as well.

"Well, I have to do something to show you up after you beat me out here today," Lexx said as he propelled the ball up to the wall with his left foot.

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DJ had learned over time that just like some people were right-handed and left-handed, so they also had a dominant foot that they used to kick. Most people, like DJ, were right-footed, while Lexx was left-footed. As DJ had noticed this during the first couple of years he'd begun playing when he turned twelve, he instinctively realized that it might be an advantage for him to be able to use both feet effectively, like how some baseball players batted both right and left-handed.

Over time, especially with passing to the wall, he had managed to develop his left foot to be nearly as effective as his right. It seemed to give him an edge, and he figured he'd need every edge if he wanted to succeed in England. As for Lexx, he typically shot with his left foot, but he never seemed to have any difficulty making a right-footed shot or pass if it was advantageous.

"Thank goodness The Boss decided to give us an extra day off after the Leicester match," Lexx said as he repeated DJ's practice of keeping the ball up ten times with his left foot, ten times with his right, then repeating the pattern.

"You're acting like we were actually on the field for ninety minutes or something," DJ grunted.

"Yes, yes, I know you have something to prove," Lexx said in a sing-song fashion.

"Like you don't? Not just coaches, but our teammates, too."

"Including Weaver?"

"Especially Weaver."

"Oi, Yank, Bonito Boy!" someone barked out in a growling voice from the player's entrance to the first-team training center. "Need an invitation? The gaffer's about to get the meeting started!"

The ball dropped as DJ turned around and found himself under the scowl of first-team assistant coach Marcus Greene, chilling even as he stood dozens of yards away. Greene was dressed in his typical black Donford tracksuit, complete with the distinctive purple dragon badge on his left breast and the initials MG on his right. The rising sun reflected off his dark, bald, shaved head.

"Got it, Coach," DJ called out as he and Lexx began jogging to the practice field. Yank was aimed at him, of course; Gord Scott, a defender and the only other American on the team, was nicknamed Mountain Man because he came from the mountains and hills of western Pennsylvania. As for Lexx, Bonito Boy was a reference to the Brazilian term *jogo bonito*—the beautiful game, as they called it there.

"Not that it's not appreciated, you two getting in some early warm-up, but you two got to get to class before you can play today," Marcus cracked.

"I know, got to get my studyin' in," DJ half-drawled at Marcus.

"In with you silly bastards," Marcus said, waving them in.
#

Donford's first-team training center had a main lecture hall where the entire first team could fit comfortably and invite the under-23 reserves and the youth academy in as well. It reminded DJ of some of the more updated lecture halls back at Hamilton State University, with broad tables and padded folding chairs arranged in a half-hexagonal shape around the terraced steps and the main presentation area below. Donford's manager, Barry Blake, was already there, mucking around on the giant whiteboard behind him and sketching out some tactical plans. He was also getting

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his laser pointer ready for the PowerPoint presentation he would show later.

Blake was a strange mix of styles. There was a hint of Junior Ryan in the man, the hard man with a tough past. You saw it in the crooked nose that had been allegedly broken seven times between the ages of fourteen and forty, the hard honey-brown eyes that looked more wolf than human, and the looming figure with broad shoulders, thick chest and back, a bigger frame than everyone on the first team except Davy Campbell.

Despite that tough-guy façade, however, he also had a sophisticated side. He insisted on directing the tactical discussions and video sessions that would start off every day of practice. He took discussing the team's tactics and studying the tendencies of other teams very seriously and had developed databases on other teams in the Premier League that included everything from passing patterns to where players preferred to shoot during penalty kicks.

His wardrobe was another habit of Blake's. During football season, DJ's father would live in his Copperheads windbreaker or hoodie, khakis, and Nike trainers. Blake was far more sophisticated. It was his habit during the morning video and tactics sessions to wear a light button-down shirt, khakis, dress shoes, and a dark sport coat with a small Donford badge. After that meeting, he would go to the locker room set aside for the coaches and change into a fresh new black warmup tracksuit with the Donford badge on his left breast and the initials BB on his right. He would occasionally join in with the lads, but mostly he observed and took notes while Marcus and the other coaches got on with the training exercises.

That was the only time players would see him in trainers. During games, he invariably would wear custom-made Italian suits, usually black and grey, with an all-black miniature version of the Donford logo on the left breast. He would even wear a suit if it was raining or snowing but would protect himself from the rain with a long black raincoat. At all times, he sported a platinum watch, gold wedding band with an onyx stone, and a gold chain with a cross hanging from it.

"Glad you lot made it," Blake said with a single glance upward. "We're away at Crystal Palace on Boxing Day and I don't care if they finished fourteenth last year, they're not going to be a pushover. I'll need everyone on the first team to work together on this, as always. All of you participate in us being ready for our opponents, don't forget."

DJ saw one of the players motion for them to sit down, a stocky, woolly-headed kid. "C'mon," Gord Scott said. "Have a seat."

DJ and Lexx sat down to the right of Gord and another young player on Gord's left. He was about the same age as DJ and Lexx, pale with blond hair and blue eyes, a few inches shorter than DJ and slighter, with a stringy musculature that suggested a marathon runner rather than a sprinter.

"You shouldn't get much of a dressing-down," Johann "Jojo" De Graff whispered as DJ sat down next to him. Jojo was a Dutch player Donford had brought from Ajax in Amsterdam, one of many great native talents produced by that club. Blake appreciated Jojo's passing skills and his ability to play nearly any midfield position imaginable. DJ appreciated him as a person for his unflappable mellowness,

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amiable nature, and their mutual interest in cannabis for both recreation and medicinal purposes. "He just got started."

DJ immediately opened the black three-ring binder that he had been carrying with him, which contained printouts of several of Blake's tactical discussions and reviews. All of it was on PowerPoint presentations, but Blake got a little irritated if people were on computers or phones during his talks, because he said he never knew if they were just answering emails or surfing Instagram. DJ wasn't sure why they couldn't set up some spy software to monitor what they were doing on their computers like the teachers at his high school did, but he guessed Blake hadn't heard of it.

After a glare from DJ, Lexx and Gord opened their binders and started taking notes. DJ knew that he had only had nominal training in soccer tactics from his past coaches, so he soaked up every bit of knowledge that Blake imparted on tactics from using empty space on the field to playing through balls into the penalty area.

"The Boss insists that we should play as a counterattacking team," Jojo whispered only loud enough for DJ to hear him. "I think we're better and don't need to rely on just that—we can be more aggressive. Well, we're a pretty good team, anyway."

As much as DJ listened to Blake and the other coaches like Marcus, he was surprised at what he was learning from Jojo. They often talked about Johann Cruyff, the legendary Dutch forward of the 1960s and 70s. DJ had seen some of his highlights on YouTube, but he never realized that he and Rinus Michels, Cruyff's coach when he was at Jojo's old club Ajax, developed a style of soccer called Total Football, where players didn't just play one position on the field; they could go wherever and whenever they wanted to whenever they

saw an opportunity to win the ball or create a scoring chance. DJ wasn't sure that he could be a good midfielder or a right back, but he appreciated the level of skill it would take to make such a plan work.

As the presentation continued, DJ looked over to the other side of the lecture hall. He saw two players there, not taking notes but staring straight ahead, making side conversation with each other as Blake continued to talk.

The one on the right was almost a pantomime of what the old-time red-top press in England considered to be a proper English striker. He was tall and lean, with a full head of luscious golden hair cut short on top and tight on the sides, a squared jaw not prominent enough to be described as lantern-shaped, and bright clear blue eyes that lit up when he was in conversation. The one on the left was younger, a couple of inches shorter, and bulkier than his companion. He was Afro-British, with skin the color of milk chocolate and wide dark eyes, his kinky hair kept tight to his skull. Underneath his short-sleeved Donford training top, his arms were covered with swirling and crowded black ink tattoos from his shirtsleeves to his wrists. These men were, respectively, Gary Weaver and Stuart Murray. They were the people that DJ was looking to replace in the Donford lineup.

"They look like they don't have a care in the world," Lexx whispered to him.

"Looks can be deceiving, especially when you know you're on display," DJ replied. "Anyway, we'll worry about them later."

#

Gary Weaver. Club legend. *Club token, more like it*, DJ thought.

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He had heard something of Weaver's history from his teammates and much of the rest of it from fan-made YouTube documentaries.

He'd grown up on the East End streets as a child. Apparently, his dad had been some sort of lower-level gangster. The story had blown up into rumors he was the bastard great-grandson of Reggie Kray and snowballed from there.

The most reliable reports said the dad, Gerald, had run off somewhere in Spain to escape an armed robbery arrest warrant. A less reliable report had suggested Gerald was in the stands in Barcelona when Gary had scored for the English national team against Spain in a European Nations League match. Whatever the case, Gary had not heard from his dad since the age of nine, after which he'd been under the care of his dad's sister and her family.

He entered Donford Academy when he was just ten years old. He was big and strong for a footballer, eventually growing to 6'2" and 200 pounds. He had made his debut for Donford at the age of sixteen in an FA Cup third round match. He wound up with two goals and he was soon on his way.

He'd been sold to Aston Villa after a year or two and he spent two years there, playing thirty games and scoring sixteen goals. Then Donford exercised its buy-back clause in the transfer and brought him home. Gary had just played his 289th game for Donford in all competitions, scoring a total of 91 goals. It had been a good career, especially compared to 99 percent of the boys from England that had tried their luck at being footballers. Nobody wanted to admit it, Gary least of all, but he was now reaching the end of his top-flight career.

As for Stewart Murray, despite a first impression suggesting he might be the British version of the old Los Angeles gangbangers, he had a more stable upbringing than Gary. He was the son of a steelworker and a school custodian in Birmingham, and scouts at Birmingham City had their eyes on him by the time he'd turned eleven. He'd gone to their youth program the next year and stayed with the team, first in its reserves and then with the first team, for the next ten years.

Donford had gotten him in a \$15 million transfer when Stewart was 22, a significant investment for the Sea Dragons but a bargain considering the 67 goals he'd scored in all competitions with the club. At 27, he was still in his prime compared to Gary, but injuries had hampered him for much of his career—multiple ones to his hamstring, knee, and ankle. Gord had mentioned Stewart had missed the equivalent of nearly two seasons due to them.

DJ was always sympathetic toward an athlete coming to the end of their career. His father's professional football career had only lasted five years, and DJ was born during Junior's final year in the NFL. He'd had to watch the YouTube videos like most everyone else. But DJ never forgot how his dad had described the end of his career, when he had to quit after his body quit on him.

"If I'd have been able to switch out my body for another one, even if I didn't live as long as I have now—God help me, but I think I would have done it," Junior told him one night when they were watching the Cowboys, his old team, in the playoffs on television. "I'd give almost anything for even one more season. I wouldn't take it for granted now, I truly wouldn't."

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I don't want to take away anyone's dream from them, DJ thought as he watched Gary and Stewart and continued to take his notes. Theirs might have to end if I want mine, though. Junior ended someone's dreams when he took their spot, and someone ended his when they took his spot. That's the way it goes.

#

DJ and Lexx jogged out to Pitch 2, one of the main training pitches for the first team at Standwood. Pitch 2 would be where they would run their exercises, Pitch 1 would be where they played their five-a-side matches, and Center Pitch, which had covered stands and was the home ground of Donford Reserves and Donford Ladies, would be where they played full eleven-a-side matches.

As they got onto the pitch, he heard a whistle and Marcus call out, "Time for *rondos*, 7v2! Get together, you all know who's where!"

The rondos, the fucking rondos. Just when I think I'm getting things figured out, I get stuck in the middle of a rondo.

From what Jerry had told him, the English players years ago used to call it "piggy-in-the-middle" after a similar kid's game, but over time people began referring to it by the Spanish name it became well-known for at Barcelona ever since Johan Cruyff had been the coach there. If Jojo was a Cruyff devotee, Marcus was a fanatic and a believer in training with the ball. Rondos were right up his alley, and he made sure they were up everyone's alley, from the first team to the academy players, thanks to his discussions with their coaches.

The rondo game itself was deceptively simple: several players would attempt to pass the ball back and forth to each

other, and there would be one or a couple of players in between them attempting to intercept those passes. Typically, there would be four or five players in a circle trying to pass to each other and one or two players in the middle trying to stop those passes. If a passer got intercepted, the defender and passer would switch places.

Even since DJ had started training at Donford, he'd already seen several different variations of the game. Sometimes Marcus would arrange the passers and defenders in parallel lines. Sometimes the ring of players would be smaller, sometimes bigger. There was one time they played not with regulation soccer balls but rugby and gridiron footballs, no hands used. Even Jojo and some of the other passing artists exchanged some double takes that day.

"DJ! Middle!" Marcus called out.

DJ usually found himself in the middle of the rondos.

From what Gord told him later, all the new players would start in the middle of the rondo, trying to scoot back and forth and intercepting the passes of those on the outside, who interspaced slicing diagonal passes to players nearby as well as the occasional balls that scooted in between the defenders.

DJ and Lexx had gone into the middle of the rondos when they first joined the team, but after just a couple of weeks, Lexx had earned his way into the ring rather than the middle. He had the lightest touch on his passes, and he managed to guide the ball to his targets a fraction of a second before the defenders could get a foot on them.

DJ wasn't as lucky. I'm not as good, he thought to himself as the passes flew around him at diagonal vectors that were just out of sight. *Every time I finally manage to intercept a pass, I get out to the circle and manage two, three passes at*

best before someone picks me off and I'm in the middle again. Fuck.

He thought back to the coaches he'd had on the youth teams in high school. They cared about their players, they cared about him, but they were miles behind the coaches at Donford like Marcus with their knowledge of the game. Many of the coaches in Texas had barely heard of Maradona and Sir Alex Ferguson, never mind Cruyff and Barcelona.

Tomas wasn't ignorant of it; his friend Tomas had his own semi-pro team, *Club de Athletico Maya*, which DJ joined in high school. Tomas knew about the wider footballing world and had some good training, which even included a rondo or two.

But that was never DJ's focus as a player back then. He was big and tall, a good target at the top of the field, who could protect the ball and shoot at any angle. He was great shooting the ball on the run or at a dead stop, and his accuracy was far better than many more experienced players, even some of the strikers at Donford. But trying to get the ball to his teammates was another matter. Usually, Tomas and the other players on the team tried to get the ball to him, rather than the other way around. And now, the rondo exposed a massive hole in his game, a gap in his skills ... *just as big of a gap between me and Laz Jojo just shot through...*

"DJ! Get it together!" Marcus called out clearly, but without heat.

All right, quit sulking. He felt the ball go behind him, where Carlos "Carlito" Carvajal was waiting. The 23-year-old Argentinian had fun trying to fake DJ out over the past couple of weeks. Most of the passes were on the ground, but

out of the corner of his eye, Carvajal took a chip to see if he could loft it past him.

DJ pivoted to his left on his right foot and stuck his other foot out behind him, using its outside surface to deflect the ball out of the circle. As he jogged to the circle and Carvajal took his place, he murmured to him in Spanish, "Too tricky there, friend. Go ahead, you'll manage three passes at best," Carvajal joked in response.

When DJ had to return to the middle of the rondo after missing his fifth pass, he wordlessly held up one hand with four fingers extended to Carvajal.

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Later, after the training session, DJ was off by himself, trying to cool down, when Marcus came over. "Looks like you managed the rondo a bit better today, lad. Know you look forward to it as much as a root canal."

"Couldn't say—I never had a root canal."

"You managed it better," Marcus continued, not unkindly.

DJ was a coach's son and knew positive reinforcement when he heard it. "Still only string together four passes at most."

"You're doing a lot better than at the start."

DJ snorted at the observation. "Lovely, maybe that'll earn me a switch to defender."

"We need forwards who can defend, who can win the ball deep in the opponent's half and do something with it," Marcus countered. "It's not like it was forty, thirty, even twenty years ago when we had a number ten or a striker just attacking but doing fuck all on defense. Everyone needs to defend or we're playing with a man down half the time." He looked into DJ's eyes. "I'm guessing your old man would