



For Simon Robinson



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...'



YUNIS GATHERED THE Grimroyd Under-18 team into a circle.

‘First of all, congratulations lads,’ he said. ‘We’ve made it to the last four of the Moor Cup. I know you must be tired and wanting to get away, but before you do, I’ve got news for you. I really think you’re going to love this.’

‘Love what?’ Vinny grumbled, his bag already on his shoulder. ‘Hurry up Yunis, I’ve got a snooker match to get to.’

‘Bear with me for a minute, Vinny, will you?’ Yunis rubbed his hands together. ‘Now

then. I've a question for you. Have any of you heard of Johnny Dexter?'

Roy put his hand up and immediately heard one or two of his new team mates laugh. He quickly realised why. He'd put his hand up. Like a schoolboy.

Roy didn't mind too much, though: he just wanted to explain who Johnny Dexter was.

'Yes, Roy,' Yunis said.

'Johnny Dexter is a legend! He played for Melchester Rovers as a defender and midfielder in the '90s. His nickname was "the Hard Man." He played eight times for England!'

'That's right, Roy,' Yunis confirmed. 'And Johnny Dexter is now coaching the Melchester Rovers youth team.'

Roy studied Coach. Why was Yunis talking about Johnny Dexter and Rovers' youth team?

‘So, has he died or something?’ Vinny asked.

Coach stared hard at Vinny, then quickly shook his head and turned to address the rest of team. ‘No, Vinny. Johnny Dexter is still very much alive. In fact he’s so alive that he’s scouting all the local leagues looking for talent. He just texted me to say that Melchester Rovers needs a dozen local lads for an expanded youth squad. And he’s coming to see us along with the twenty or so other local teams that...’

‘When?’ Roy interrupted.

‘Soon.’

‘But when?’ Roy asked, hearing some of the other players laughing at him again. He knew they thought he was a little kid. But he didn’t care. He needed to know the answer. He had always dreamed of being scouted by Melchester Rovers.

Yunis rubbed his chin. ‘I don’t know for sure, Roy, but it could be the semi on Wednesday, or it could be the final on Sunday, if we qualify for it. Just make sure you’re here every game and every training session, all of you. Got it?’

‘Rovers are rubbish,’ Vinny sneered.

‘League Two rubbish?’ Yunis said harshly to his captain. ‘Professional footballer rubbish? Really?’

Roy ignored Vinny and looked at the rest of the Grimroyd Under-18 players, and saw the hope in their eyes, some of them chatting excitedly because they’d just been told they had a shot at getting a trial at Melchester Rovers, for a professional football team.

‘And, whether he’s here or not, make sure we win the semi,’ Yunis shouted, his team dispersing, before turning to Roy and extending an arm around his shoulder.

‘Now, a word, young Mr Race.’

Roy felt Yunis pull him gently away from the others.



‘Roy?’

‘Yes, Coach.’

‘You worked hard today.’

‘Thanks, Coach.’ Roy was waiting for a but.

‘But,’ Yunis went on, ‘to be brutally honest, you looked a bit out of your depth.’

Roy nodded. He knew it.

‘You need to work on strength,’ Yunis said. ‘You need to toughen up and wise up. The game is different at this level. Do you agree?’

‘I do.’

‘If the opposition push you,’ Yunis went on, ‘you have to push back – hard. If you don’t they’ll just ease you out of the way when you get near the penalty area. Like that defender did for that corner near the end of the second half. Are you with me, Roy?’

‘Yes, Coach.’

‘So when they come at you, go at them, put your shoulder in. Hard. If you can use your momentum to counter their momentum, you

can stay on your feet and do what you want to do with the ball. Don't let them bully you. You have to be physical now you're playing bigger lads. Otherwise your talent counts for nothing. Watch how other players do it. Learn. Be clever.'

'Yes, Coach.'

'I know what you've got, Roy, because I've watched you playing for years and you are – without question – the most talented young footballer I have ever seen. But I always knew that moving up to this level would be your greatest challenge. You were an extraordinary player when you were a kid, but you're not playing against kids any more. Understand?'

'Yes, Coach.'

'And one more thing,' Yunis added. 'You need to be more vocal. Call for the ball and shout at your teammates to demand the ball

from them, even off Vinny. Okay?’

‘Yes, Coach.’

‘I mean it, Roy, you have to demand it, claim it, insist they give the ball to you. Or they just won’t.’

Roy said thank you to Yunis and, with all the other players from his game gone, he stayed on to watch the one remaining Under-18 game, one that had kicked off half an hour later than Grimroyd’s.

He wanted to learn.

Fred and Rover came to join him.

‘Roy.’

‘Fred.’

‘How’s your dad?’

‘Getting better,’ Roy said, kneeling to stroke Rover, his eyes still on the football.

‘Tell him I was asking after him.’

‘I will.’

The old man coughed. ‘I was watching

you. Playing, like.'

'Yeah?' Roy said.

'Yeah. You're going to have to work harder to match these lads,' Fred said.

Roy looked at the old man. 'I know,' he said. 'You're right. But I will.'