



Twelve Yards

Suddenly it all seemed so impossible. In Doug's mind the ball was a lead weight, an immovable object destined to end up anywhere but the back of the net. Running through his head were past failures – the penalties he'd missed for club and country; the day he lost his side the Scottish schools' cup final. He glanced up at the goalkeeper. When had the man between the posts transformed into such a mountainous figure? He must be at least six foot five inches, bigger maybe.

Doug's pulse quickened as he took a step back from the ball and waited for the whistle. If he missed now, he could well seal his place on the transfer list, not to mention his side's exit from the prestigious Euro League.

How had it come to this? Only one year before, Scotland's dazzling striker Doug Mackay had been the hottest property

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in football. An unbelievable performance in the World Cup had seen him named World Footballer of the Year at a star studded ceremony in Spain, where he stood shoulder to shoulder with his football heroes as he accepted the highest honour in the game.

Sponsorship deals, magazine covers, press conferences, transfer offers; they all came thick and fast for Doug – the Dalkirk Albion boot boy turned megastar.

After the drama of the World Cup, it became instantly obvious that Doug wouldn't be staying at Dalkirk much longer. As if his performances on the field hadn't boosted his profile enough, his role in uncovering a plot to overthrow the government of the host country had catapulted him straight to the centre of a worldwide news frenzy.

Dalkirk could name their price. Clubs from all over Europe clamoured for Doug's signature, desperately trying to convince him that a man of his talents belonged with them. In the end, it was the London club Middlewood that had their bid accepted by Dalkirk. Nobody was surprised.

The proud London club had been a sleeping giant for years, but suddenly found themselves revived after a takeover by a consortium of wealthy local businessmen. It was the stuff of dreams for Middlewood fans. Overnight they became the team to beat.

The world's greatest players were promptly snapped up, with millions of pounds being splashed around like pennies. Money was no object as Middlewood's charismatic manager Roberto Hernandez weaved together a dream team that could compete with – and destroy – the best.

Despite the galaxy of stars already signed up by Middlewood, Doug's transfer had been big news. His meteoric rise to fame from humble beginnings and stunning form at the World Cup made sure of that. On the day he posed for photos in his Middlewood shirt, a London newspaper had declared: 'Miracle Man Finally Signs'. Doug's constant willingness to share his faith in God meant articles about him more often than not had some sort of reference to his being a Christian. Sometimes they were kind, sometimes they were not. But Doug had learned to ignore the papers as much as possible and just try to focus on getting on with his job. The future looked perfect. All Doug had to do was keep turning in the type of performances that came to him so naturally, and everything would be fine. But that was the problem. Within weeks of arriving at Middlewood, things had taken a turn for the worse.

Doug's debut had naturally attracted a great deal of attention, and a full house awaited him and his team-mates as he

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stepped onto the lush turf at Middlewood's brand new Standbury Lane stadium for the first time.

The roar of 70,000 expectant fans had sent shivers down his spine as the whistle blew for kick-off, reminding him that anything less than victory and success was now unacceptable.

As the game progressed Doug began to worry. He had played alongside the world's greatest players before, but with each minute that passed he began to suffer from a growing sense of apprehension. In the past, it felt like he had always been fighting for the underdogs and defying the odds. But, suddenly, with so much weight of expectation on his shoulders, Doug was struggling to find his touch and even spurned two excellent chances to put the ball in the back of the net. He was substituted with twenty-five minutes still to play, and couldn't help but think his debut had been a disaster.

In the weeks that followed things hadn't improved. Average performances in domestic and European competitions saw Doug drop to the bench on a more permanent basis, with Italian international Luca Tavano replacing him up front.

No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't recapture the form that had prompted Middlewood to sign him, and with each game that passed Doug found it

harder and harder to stay in a positive frame of mind, his thoughts often drifting to happier times playing a starring role for Dalkirk.

By the end of November, and despite Doug's form, Middlewood were riding high in the league and were building a healthy lead over their nearest challengers. But in their European games things hadn't quite been going to plan.

Draws in their first two matches and a shock defeat in their third meant the historic club now faced a huge task just to qualify from their group and claim a place in the last sixteen of the Euro League competition. Nobody could believe how badly they were struggling, especially as Middlewood were the reigning champions in the tournament, but it was widely assumed things would be put right before long.

For Doug, the situation was especially depressing, as a couple of bad misses in the first two group games had cost his team dear, and although he wasn't the only player who had failed to live up to his reputation on the big stage, he was taking more than his fair share of the blame for the team's European woes.

It was during the final Euro League group game that Doug had been presented with a golden opportunity to turn the season around – for himself, his team-mates, and the whole club.