

Round Balls & Astro turf

Chapter One

Lucozade

Nothing new. The ball thwacked into the back of the tin. The Dutch were as ever hammering us. Another penalty corner to them and another goal.

Incredibly strange really. The same country, same people, mess up so much at their national sport, soccer; they are perpetual underachievers in most walks of life. But put a hockey stick in their hand and they are fucking supermen.

The backboard had been taking a beating today, but for once we were holding on, matching them in possession play and attacks. But the last goal seemed to be a back-breaker for us. I could see the boys' shoulders sag.

It was either that or the alcohol was wearing off. Half of them had been piss-drunk when they had gotten onto the pitch and had gone into a dribbling frenzy. "Nothing like a few shots of al-ko-haul to bring out our Pakistani genius," the Skipper often says. A couple had already puked their guts out in the backroom before they had even walked onto the field. So for the first twenty-five minutes of the half, they had been experiencing the post-puking euphoria and had played a blinder.

Yet now it seemed they were all dehydrating. The Dutch with their Lucozade and Glucose pills were beating out stern Pakistani mettle. They were outlasting us.

And I could feel my knee starting to give away.

The half-time hooter came and saved us from going further in deficit. We walked back to the changing rooms. Dejected.

The Coach sought to rise to the occasion; he unveiled a surprise.

“Boys, don’t worry. I’ve got a boost for you too.” With that he opened up a mini freezer and pulled out hoards of Lucozade. “Lucozade for you as well.”

A muted cheer went around. The players with hangovers complained about the cheer.

“I would rather Lucozade had been Boddingtons,” the Skipper growled. But he gulped down a few cans of Lucozade anyways.

On team strategy, Coach said nothing. He rarely does. I asked him if we could switch to five forwards as the Dutch were playing with a back three. He told me he thought that is what we had been playing for the last half. And then he told us to drink more Lucozade.

That is all he ever told us to do. And to “Work Harder and Believe.” He told me work harder and believe in the midfield. Told the others to work harder and believe in their positions too.

To one side, Zak, as ever, was getting an earbashing from the Skipper.

I asked the Skipper if we could switch to five forwards. He told me to keep my fucking mouth shut. To keep my silver spoon in. But when we went on to the field we switched to five forwards anyways.

And it worked. We tore the Dutch to shreds and scored four. They scored two. Considering we were down by three when we went into the break, we lost by one. Only one.

After the buzzer, the coach cheered us up, “Well played boys. See how well the Lucozade worked. More Lucozade to celebrate.”

The Skipper told him to shut the fuck up and after we had gotten dressed up, he took the others with him to the pub to celebrate. He took everyone but me. And Zak.

I didn't see what there was to celebrate. We had lost.

“Lucozade, Sam?” Zak asked me.

“Nah man ! Have too much in me already. I played the last quarter bursting to take a piss.”

Chapter Two

She's got balls

Zak slunked off to the hostels, dejected, when I said did not want to hang with him either.

I just hung around the stadium 'cuz I had nothing better to do. I didn't want to go back to the dingy hostel either. Q would be back there in an hour or so, pissed out of his mind. It normally took him three hours to settle down and drop off to sleep. So it was four to five hours before I could go back to the University of Amsterdam Hostels that were housing us. So I resolved to hang around for a bit.

Normally it was quite good fun hanging out at the stadium. Some people from the local Pakistani community would come there to see us play and were nice to talk to after the match. Some of the ex-pats would even have desi food on them and would offer a bite to players too.

Sadly, this time around there were few of them there. It was possibly because it was a working day. But in all probability it was because the Dutch teams had been thrashing the living daylights out of us for all of last week. We had lost four straight rather humiliatingly to various local clubs on this tour and I guess it had made all ex-pats give up on us.

As had our Coach. For now, he was sitting in the coach's box on the side of the field. He was to coach the Girls' team now.

There was no one else around in the stands, so I went and sat next to him. He acknowledged me with a nod.

He is a funny old man, the Coach. An Olympic medal winner and he looks all so imposing. Of typical Gojra stock. But I am yet to see a meeker man. All that natural playing ability he had and all the awards he had won, the man really does not have a clue about anything, be it life or hockey. But for some reason they keep sending this man on International trips with our teams. Possibly because he is rather harmless and is unlikely to have a hand in team politics. And probably because he is related to the head of the Hockey Federation.

I noticed he was writing out an urdu couplet on his pad. Out on the field the girls were struggling.

‘Bazeecha-e-Atfaal hai duniya merai agai’

After a couple of minutes, I could see why the team was losing.

‘Hota hai shab-o-roz tamasha merai aagai’

The team balance was all wrong. The faster players were in the midfield. The sturdy ones up-front were slow and the defensive players, though speedy, were just too lightweight to play defense. I ventured to mention that to the coach.

For once, he agreed with me. But then added, “What do you want me to do? They are only girls.”

“Yeah,” I thought, “He has a point.” Don’t know why they insist on sending girls out to play on these trips as well.

Girls playing hockey. It was rather sad, them with their track suits against those Dutch women in their short skirts. Girls against women. They got hammered each time. ‘At least they aren’t stuck in Shalwar Kameez as in Pakistan,’ I mused.

Still, all they were doing was eat up the funds of the Hockey Federation. Our Junior Boy’s Team could not be here because some Brainiac in the Federtaion thought they ought to send a girls team out this year to Holland. Apparently, some EU regulation required gender balance on all sports tours to Europe.

Speaking of balance, sure enough, my point about the balance of the team was being proven right. The right midfielder was being pulled all over the field. She was filling in on offence and defence. It was rather impressive the way she sought to fill in on both ends. But sadly as coaches often point out, the ball can move faster than a player on Astroturf and the Dutch were exposing her time and again, exploiting the space she left behind her whenever she was out of position.

‘Round balls and Astroturf,’ I mused.

Coach got what I meant. He repeated, ‘Round balls and Astroturf.’

At half time she came in with the team and smashed up her stick on a bench. The others did not bat an eyelid. I guessed it must be the stick-smasher’s normal reaction. She laid into the team, ranting and raving. And then into the Coach.

“Why the hell don’t you coach?” she roared at him.

Impressive spirit.

The coach did not respond. She ranted and raged like a real looney. Talked about having to run all over to cover for everyone.

“My point exactly,” I smiled to myself. “Don’t you know you are out of position?”

And then the smirk was as suddenly wiped off. As if she had read my thoughts, the mad right midfielder turned on me. “And what the hell is *he* doing in a girl’s locker room?” she screamed at the Coach.

I looked at the Coach for help. I had just wandered in along with the Coach at half-time.

For once, help was forthcoming. “Ummm.... He is my new assistant for this team. He will be helping me coach you girls.”

“Him!!??” she looked at me incredulously. “He is a reserve for the first team. And a lame one at that.”

That one hurt me. More than my bum knee.

She sized me up for a further moment. And then stormed out of the room. On the way out she picked up another stick to replace the one she had smashed.

“Let’s play,” she called out to the others. The others followed her lead and filed out.

“Wow! She’s sure got balls.” I said to no one in particular.

The coach heard me. “Sure, she does. After all, she is my daughter.”

Chapter Three

The Boo Boo Prize

Things suddenly took a turn for the worse for me. Even though I had not been invited, it seems my not going to the pub with the rest of the team had resulted in rather dire consequences for me. The Skipper dropped me from the team altogether.

It might even have been welcome as my knee had been hurting me again, but for the way that it was done. They replaced me with Zak. Of all the people, Fucking Zak.

Apparently, Zak had left the stadium and gone looking for the Skipper. As ever he had kissed up to him. The Skipper had kicked him around a bit and then rewarded him with my spot on the team. Apparently, the team had unanimously voted me off due to my bum knee. Not that it had affected my performance. They just thought that it could go anytime. And that they thought me aloof and not contributing to the ‘team spirits [sic].’ Message seemed clear: Next time this rich boy should buy them all drinks. Quite how that was going to happen when I was not invited was beyond me (did they want my credit card and not me?), but for now I had been ousted.

And replaced with Zak ! That guy doesn’t know the right end of the stick from the back of his ass.

And worse was yet to come. In the afternoon, the Coach called me in and dropped the girls’ team in my lap.

I complained, said no, said absolutely no. But the Coach told me that the other alternative was to send me back to Pakistan. He could not justify the expense of my staying on otherwise. This way, he rationalized, I could stay with the team and have my knee treated as well.

“Why do I win this fucking booby prize?” I asked him.

“This way you can put your theories on hockey to good use.”

With that he shuttled me out of the room. Quickly.

I bumped into the Skip outside. He had a few of his cronies with him.

“And you said we did not have any balls. What about your new team now?”

I could have run him through there and then.

Chapter Four

Taking over

As much as I did not want to coach the Girls Team, the Girls Team did not also want to be coached.

More particularly Z – Zainab, the Coach’s daughter, called Zee by one and all – did not want a ‘clueless, limping has been’ coaching the team. The others just nodded their heads in approval.

I could not figure out the hold she had on them. Didn’t really care to try to find out actually. I could have left the whole matter there, but I did not want to be sent back to Pakistan. And after I had thought over the matter last night, I did really want to try my hand at strategy and managing and coaching a team, even if it was only girls. Girls, I had guessed would be more amenable. Moldable. Easier to start off coaching from the start.

But this one girl roaring at me was anything but that.

It was then that I put my cunning plan into action. Divide and conquer.

“Well, why don’t you go take it up with your daddy then?” I countered.

She glowered at the suggestion and the fact that I had said daddy instead of coach. For a moment, I recalled the hockey

she had smashed on the bench; I swallowed. But she for some reason did not go ballistic. She just stalked off to check up on Coach.

Her leaving gave me an opportunity alone with the rest of the girls.

I introduced myself to them. Some of them giggled. A couple even said they had admired how well I had played for the team before my injury. One even remembered my goals against India.

All in all I found them to be a pleasant group. A couple seemed to have leadership qualities too. I latched onto one in particular who played centre-half for the team and had had quite a good game against the Dutch last time. I made up my mind there and then.

I was putting all of them through a number of drills when Z returned. She was a crest-fallen. Apparently, the Coach had stood his ground and prevailed.

She went in and joined the team without a word.

I put them all through 50 metre sprints and timed them. I checked the defense players against the forwards on defense. And then the mid-fielders against the forwards.

I took notes and just as I suspected little thought had gone into team organization. Most of the players played where they felt like or wherever they had found a space. Almost all were in wrong positions for their skills, speed and endurance.

So I changed a number of them around. Few objected. Z almost did, but then thought better and held her peace. The Coach had really done a number on her.

And then, I stripped Z of her captaincy and gave it to Saira, the Centre-half.

Chapter Five

Brimstone cooling

If the end of the world had happened there and then, I would not have noticed. The madwoman was ranting and raving at me. Again.

I couldn't tell you what she said to me, but there were a lot of obscenities uttered by her, most of which I would have thought were unsuited for feminine lips, or for that matter mine.

“You haven't earned it,” is all I suggested to her. “Saira here has. And your ranting and raving is not what is expected from a *former* Captain.”

With that I walked off. And she walked besides me, still screaming her head off.

It all ended at a “Then I won't play.”

I said, “Fine.” And she stalked off.

Later that afternoon she came back to me and told me that she will play. I said, “Fine” again.

The next day, when we got together again, the whole team was quite receptive. I changed all positions around. Z I put in at inside right on the front-line. She had been playing most of the matches there anyways, outrunning the girl who played at that position during matches. The old inside right I put back in

midfield. She had alright speed but not great reactions or ability to dribble. She was going to be a holding midfielder as she could tackle well and was good with linkup plays.

She took it quite nicely actually. “Anything to keep Z from screaming at me for missing the chances she fed me,” she smiled. “Now I get to scream at her.”

Z had quite a bit of trouble playing in the forward line only. I had specifically told her not to drop back all the time and she just refused to at times. She instinctively moved over to wherever the action was and wherever the ball went.

“This is not soccer. There are no roving players here,” I screamed at her. And after a while I think it took root with her. If nothing else, I could not fault her commitment to improving and playing better. Once I demonstrated to her how she throws off the balance of the team by getting out of position all the time, I think she took it in. And she also rather enjoyed scoring more goals at her new position.

Most of the girls liked their new positions as they seemed to suit their playing styles. That is all but the keeper. SJ was crap and there wasn't any other position I could put her. So she remained in goal. I reasoned that I will have to make do with a strong back line only. For now.

All of this seemed nice until the first match we played after I took over. And then another dutch team took us apart.

Chapter Six

A discovery

The first game was a disaster. Much as the players had been practicing at their new positions, come game day, they all seemed to gravitate back to their original positions. Z was the worst of the bunch. She took to dictating the play on the field again and at half time destroyed two sticks. After smashing her own, she picked up the one lying close by and hammered it to bits.

Her and SJ actually. Both of them were horrible. The goalie let in six. She was at fault for four of the goals. Two of them she even dived out of the way of when the players of the opposite team fired scorching shots at her.

Z gave her shit for that. She took a hockey ball and hurled it at her. Luckily SJ was wearing her pads. The ball rebounded off of her and rolled away. The room went silent.

I stayed quiet all through this.

Z raged on, “I can fucking keep goal better than this cow.”

“Then why don’t you,” SJ chucked down her gloves and wouldn’t talk to anyone anymore.

So Z picked up the gloves and the spare pads and went in goal. And she played a blinder. The one advantage of playing in goal with pads and all is that the player cannot wander all over.

Two, she was naturally gifted at that position too with great positional sense and was totally fearless.

We did not concede a single goal thereafter. For another couple of matches. And Z ended up permanently placed in goal.

SJ I tried out in Z's spot, hoping I would get lucky with her there too, but nothing doing. She was crap at that position too. Eventually I put her back on the bench as the backup keeper.

Chapter Seven

Left back

My knee in the meanwhile was undergoing therapy. In his arseholic way the Skipper had done me a favour by taking me out. The doctor indicated to me that the tendons on my knee had been on the verge of snapping. If they had, that would have been the end of my career. As it was, I needed just a couple of months off to recuperate.

That unfortunately meant I would miss the trip to Austria with the Men's team and most the matches of the second leg of the Holland tour thereafter. I had hoped to make it back for the final matches against the Dutch national team. It was the best I could hope for, according to the doctors.

What added to my frustration with my own state was that I was not allowed to come along with the team to Austria. I was instructed to stay behind and work with the girls.

Initially after it had been announced that I would be coaching the Girls' team, the guys had ribbed me mercilessly about it. But after they saw a couple of the girls come around and take me out for dinner, they were left speechless. All of them had tried to get along with the girls in the team, but none of them ever gave them the time of day. And with Z acting as a mother hen they were always pecked away before they got two words in sideways.

Z herself turned out to be rather nice. It was the competitive spirit I think that used to make her such a loon at times.

Underneath the crusty exterior, she turned out to be quite sane. And much as it pains me to admit, quite a nice person.

It was her intelligence that impressed me the most, and her passion for the game. I asked her once how come she knuckled under to me so easily when I took over and she said because when she thought about it, she realized that I had been right.

I was dumbfounded. An admission I never would have expected from her. I thought I might rib her a little about my being right. But then I thought better.

And in any event, if I had bugged her about it, she probably would have broken one of my limbs.

Chapter Eight

Right Out

I was surprised to find out that Z had family in Amsterdam and that her mother was actually a Dutch national.

Actually strike that.

I had never expected the Coach would have a Dutch wife. I guess there were sides to the old so-and-so that I had not noticed. Apparently they had now been happily married for almost thirty years.

I mean Z had to have had a non-Pakistani mother. Her mother had to have been a looker too as she had to compensate for the Coach's looks in her kids. The Coach after all resembled a toad; so her mother must be a princess. Z therefore was somewhere in between a toad and a prince and herself was fairer than most Pakistani girls. Plus she knew Dutch. That should have been a giveaway, especially how she cursed mostly in Dutch when she went off on someone. I had picked up the language too in my several visits here and it had not struck me earlier, but her knowledge of the city and how she talked to the locals was a dead giveaway.

She had not been staying at the dorms with the other girls I found out. So I had guessed she had a boy friend in town. Most girls who tend to come over, or for that matter, men, have an opposite number in town. But as it turned out she was crashing with her grandmother.

I don't know why but finding out she had a grandmother and not a boyfriend made me smile.

She offered to take me out to town after one of our victories. Did I mention we had started winning? Quite convincingly too. After a slight hesitation (affectation), I took her up on the offer. I had begun to enjoy being around her.

That evening was the first time I saw her out of her track suit and in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Completely casual, she wasn't unpleasant looking. I, on the other hand, was all dressed up in my Pakistan Hockey Team dress: green blazer, tie, shirt and light brown pants with dress shoes.

She saw me and broke out laughing. "Coach, don't you ever loosen up?" she chortled. Then she loosened up my tie and ruffled my hair. "Take off the jacket and lose the tie."

I was reluctant to comply, but when she said, "They'll only get messed up where we are going," I was quick to comply. I had worked much too hard to get the green national blazer.

The trip in town was quite fabulous. I was rather stunned when she took me down to the Red Light district. She didn't bat an eyelid as we passed outside all the brothels. "Best place to score some good pot," she explained.

We headed down off the Haffa Strasse and into a cornershop where we picked up some homegrown pot. I had partaken a couple of dookies on trips years ago when I had been a green junior and now I didn't mind smoking up every once in a while.

So we smoked a few spliffs and they got me giddy. They always have that effect on me. Z seemed to somehow get more serious.

We wandered around for a bit. My feet started hurting from all that walking in dress shoes, so we got on a tour bus for a tour around the city.

We were sitting on the top level of the bus in the back, when she asked me.

“Coach, do you like me?”

“Erm...” I giggled. “Um, no.”

“No seriously.”

She touched my hand.

I hesitated. She noticed and suddenly backed off.

“Heheheh! Fooled ya!” she spoke out. “After all, I think I’m gay.”

“Hehhehe! Prolly are,” I added.

But my heart had skipped a couple of beats.

Chapter Nine

Transition play

I woke up the next morning on her couch. It was early but she was gone. Probably doing her laps. I could hear her grandmother moving around downstairs in the kitchen. There was a jackhammer going off in my head. Damn Techno Music. My mouth felt cardboard dry and I really had to pee. I was still dressed in my clothes from last night. My jacket was a crumpled mess and I had used it as a wraparound on the couch and my tie was tied across my forehead like Rambo.

‘Huh?’ I tried to recollect last night. It was a blank.

I wanted breakfast, I wanted to pee, but more than anything I wanted to avoid the walk of shame. I dared not crawl downstairs to face the grandmother. Maybe Z was downstairs with her grandmother, but I couldn’t hear her at all.

I waited around for the grandmother to move away from the kitchen, which I could see was on the way to the main door out. I waited too hoping Z would be back. As I waited I looked around the room.

Not your typical girl’s room. No dresses or jewelery in sight. No books to speak of. A lot of music CDs though. All dutch and dance music. Not interested. Also, this was clearly the room of a hockey obsessive. Posters of dutch players were all around. Bovelander (the breaker of Pakistani hearts so many a time), Horst Veen, and a couple of female players I didn’t know but fancied on first sight. The only Pakistani poster was

of Arbaz Senior, the recently retired contemporary master. Also, an asshole.

The room was clean. Spotless. Even her bed, which I imagine she had slept in last night, was made. The only mess was around the couch where I had slept. Throw cushions were sprawled across the floor. I had probably kicked them off in my sleep. I pick them up and put them back on the couch. Then I straightened out my jacket as best as I could and put it on.

I heard the grandmother downstairs walk to another room to answer the phone. I slipped down the stairs and out the front door. I don't think she saw me.

Despite the hangover, I felt giddy. Didn't we almost have a moment? Yes, of course we did. I was happy.

I walked down the street and noticed people were staring at me. Did they know? How could they know? I wanted to stop them and tell them nothing had happened last night, but, whaaa....

It was just before breakfast when I reached the hostel. The Men's team was checking back in, back from their trip. They looked at me and started laughing. The Skipper called me a cock. I gave him the finger and tried to move on. Then another player asked, 'How's it hanging Cock?' Gave him the finger too. And then another asked to the same effect. Then another. By the time I moved past them, I was turning purple with rage. What the Fuck? The giddiness had evaporated.

I headed straight up to my room, stripped off my jacket and went to the basin to splash some water on my face. And then I noticed in the mirror what everyone had been on about.

There, on my forehead, were the dutch words for coach, 'Koch', scrawled in bold red lipstick. And on my right cheek there was a less prominent, red lipstick mark left by a kiss.

Chapter Ten

Mixed Signals

All day long she did not talk to me. I was confused. She had asked me out... hadn't she? She kissed me, didn't she? At least on the cheek. What had that meant? I had quickly forgotten the Koch embarrassment and now only seemed focused on the kiss. I felt like a teenager.

I looked at her during warmup, doing laps. The rest of the day since she was in goal, I could not talk to her. She was focused and I was off my game. I remained distracted all day and let the girls play as they willed. They managed well enough on their own and by now were gelling as a team.

Then, during the drinks break, when I saw her talking to other players, I thought she was talking about me. When I saw them giggle and point at me, I grew even more nervous. Maybe it was just the Koch story. Turns out it was. Z had however left out who I had been out with. And I am guessing, the kiss.

For a second, I was angry she had not mentioned herself, and then it hit me like a ton of bricks. I was her coach. There was nothing I could do anyways. No fraternizing allowed. Highly improper, frowned at.

The moment I got her alone, I didn't know what to say.

'Oi Lesbo,' was all I blurted out. A little too loud.

I heard a couple of players snicker in the corridor. Z was aghast. She quickly shuffled past me and out.

‘At least I don’t react to girls like a virgin, coach,’ were her last words to me.

I banged my head on the wall. Idiot.

Chapter Eleven

Offence

Things seemed to get back to normal slowly. There was now an awkwardness in my interactions with Z. She started acting a little too eager or off at most times. I, for some reason, acted with the greatest degree of formality. Whereas once I called her ‘yaar,’ I now called her ‘madam.’ She continually now called me ‘Sir.’ ‘Yes sir,’ ‘Jee sir,’ ‘When sir.’ I hated it but I still looked forward to each training session.

I had been in love before. I had had flings before. But this was so different. I continually felt off balance around her. Didn’t feel the need to dominate the conversation with her. Or to dominate her.

During that time, the team took the bus up to Rotterdam for a match with the local club. I was sat up front. SJ came and sat next to me. Z was a couple of seats back.

SJ had been coming on well in the team now. In Z’s spot up front. I guess all she needed was confidence.

The trip was long and somewhere along the way SJ flirted with me. Somewhere along the way, I responded. By the time, we got off the bus, she was holding my hand.

Stuff happened. Still an idiot.

Chapter Twelve

Foul

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ I roared. ‘Are you nuts?’
‘Why do you do these things? This is a practice match.’

Z in goal had smashed into SJ and knocked her out cold. I knew she did it on purpose as SJ had already scored and the hit was a couple of seconds late. Intentional.

While a couple of the players walked a still bloodied, still groggy SJ off the field to the physio’s, I grabbed Z by the arm and dragged her to one side.

She took off her goalie’s mask. She had a smirk on her face. She didn’t say anything, which angered me more. I roared on. Somewhere in there tears started streaming down her face, but the smirk still remained.

I was still holding her by the arm.

Chapter Thirteen

Interception

I got back in the men's team.

Somewhere in there, SJ moved on to the Skipper. At first, I guessed he felt guilty, so he moved me back with the first team. More accurately, since I was still not 100%, he let me come back and take all the practices with the first team. Matchplay was still a ways off. But I was back in the reserves. A chance to play.

But then again it probably was not guilt that got me back in the team. Knowing the Skipper he probably had baser reasons. He often had SJ around the practices. He made it a point to kiss her a couple of times while I was around. He wanted to make me jealous. I know SJ probably did not enjoy it since her lips must have been still sore from the stitches she had to get when Z had smashed her.

I looked at the two of them and turned my back on them. They deserved each other. Idiots. All three of us were smiling and had gotten what we deserved.

Chapter Fourteen

What we deserve

Well, not me. I hadn't gotten what I had deserved. I took a few days off and looked at myself and thought. I was going to get what I deserve. What I want.

I had a plan. And it was time to get my finger out.

First, I had to get myself fired.

Chapter Fifteen

Zak scores

When the scorpion stung the rat in the milk dish.... or was it a frog? Well, whatever, didn't the scorpion say it was in his nature to sting.

Well it is in Zak's nature to sting. He is predictable like that.

I offhandedly mentioned to him during a practice that since I was not making the first team anyways, I was thinking of quitting and taking on coaching the girl's team full-time.

Two days later, I was back in the first team. The Skipper however, made it a condition that I quit coaching the Girl's team. I hemmed and hawed and then was only too happy to comply.

Skipper thought he had won. I was happy to let him think that.

He however made the mistake of giving me Zak's spot on the team.

Zak glowered, but did nothing.

I made a call. News somehow found its way to the Hockey Federation that the Skipper had gotten SJ pregnant.

The shit hit the fan. SJ's dad was a MNA maulvi back home. He made the Skipper an offer he could not refuse.

The Skipper guessed it was Zak who had leaked the news. After all he too knew Zak's nature. He punched Zak in a team meeting. Both were called back to Pakistan.

We got a new captain. I was appointed Vice captain. Even the Coach started coaching. And we beat the Dutch team in last two matches on the tour.

Final Sixteen

Round Balls and Astro Turf

Most people agree that the introduction of Astro Turf, in place of grass, meant the end of the Asian way of playing in hockey. The less informed incorrectly think that it took the skill out of the game. They think Asian hockey was based on stick control and dribbling, so the introduction of the fast surface reduced those aspects of the game. I had come to realize over the last few months that that was not the case. The flatter, smoother Astro Turf should have made ball control and dribbling easier. The Asian way failed because it was over-elaborate, instead of being direct. Where long shots on grass would bounce away, direct play is the way to win on Astro Turf. And in life.

So, I figured that was the way I was going to win.

Z was at her grandmother's when I tracked her down. I had heard that she was not coming back to Pakistan with the team; she was going to stick around for a couple of weeks in Amsterdam. So I gambled and rescheduled my flight back too.

I rang the doorbell. The grandmother answered the door. Same door I had slipped out of weeks ago. I introduced myself this time. She smiled. 'You were her coach, right,' she asked.

'Yes, I was. I wanted to talk to Zainab.'

She walked me in.

'Hey,' I saw her.

Zainab was slumped on the sofa. She sat up when she saw me.
'You didn't go back?'

'Nah, I thought I'd stick around for a bit.'

I sat down next to her on the couch. Her Granma asked me if I wanted tea. I nodded to say yes. Smiled to signal a thank you. She sauntered off.

I took a breath. 'Listen,' I blurted, 'I just came to say, I miss you.'

'Yeah, Coach, I miss you too.'

'No, not coach. I mean, I really miss you.' I took her hand.

'About time,' she smirked. Same smirk as when she had smashed SJ.

She kissed me. My ears tingled.

'Round balls and Astro Turf,' I mumbled.

'Shut up,' she hushed.

I kissed her back. This was going to be some ride.