Here he comes…

“OH MY WORD!”, screamed the commentator in harmony with my scream.

I stood and held my head in disbelief. Christiano Ronaldo, my all time soccer idol, just scored a freekick goal from 30 yards away.

I’ve always dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player since I could remember. To pursue my dreams, I played for my school team and Asiop – a soccer academy and the birthplace of countless Indonesian national team players. However, life in Asiop completely contrasts with life my school team. While Asiop is filled with extremely diligent hard workers in becoming a professional athlete, my school it’s filled with kids who play for fun. Anyone including myself would’ve thought that I would learn much more from Asiop than from my school team. But instead, the most precious lesson I learned was with my school team.

It was the beginning of the soccer season of freshman year. As the team captain, I discussed my worries with my coach. The quality of our school team was mediocre at best. The team composition was unbalanced with better players in attackers than defenders. Disappointing scores such as 5-1, 6-0, 4-0, were common. Scores we would get whipped for in Asiop. Coach and I both knew that for the team to have a chance, we need someone to be a defender. I was the captain and by far the best attacker in the team. It wouldn’t make sense for me to play defense.

As an avid fan of Cristiano Ronaldo, I’ve always wanted to play in attack and to score goals like him. I trained night and day for years as a striker. I wanted to break my own records, the school records, and to steal the show in games. To carve a legacy with individual glory. But as team captain, my duty is to get my team, not just myself, to the finish line. My team comes first, and my team is bigger than any individual in the team, including me and my ego.

I lost sleep contemplating sacrificing my position to play defense. But I knew that it’s the right thing for my team. To others, switching such positions might not seem like a big deal; but it was a big tournament and my only chance to showcase my ability in playing upfront would help me get scouted into better teams.

One day, I stumbled upon an article about Alessandro Del Piero, the captain of Juventus, who decided to stay when his team got relegated to Serie B because of the Calciopoli scandal. He stayed in the club while all his teammates left, and Juventus collapsed. He was willing to sacrifice his career playing in lower tier in a weaker team despite being one of the best players in the world at the time. His story resonated with me, and I read his career story trembling out of admiration.

His story inspired me to see sacrifices for the team as a responsibility, not an option. I realized that for a captain, is not about being the top scorer or winning the Ballon d’Or. I sacrificed my position to be a defender for the whole year. I played with all my heart and eventually excelled as the heart of the defense through blocking attacks and supplying long balls forward. Playing defense was no longer a sacrifice anymore. I finally understood the joy that Del Piero felt.

Despite switching positions, we still lost many games. But coach and I were proud because we played much better than if I had stayed a striker. The score may tell us that we lost, but we inherently won. I am proud that I have done not what a true striker would, but what a true captain. I learned what it meant to be a leader that year.

As a player, a legendary striker like Ronaldo gets the spotlight. But at heart, I prefer to be a leader like Del Piero.