

# The Flight

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As he was crowded out of space, the winger had no choice but to play a backpass to his supporting defender. And the left-back, with his first touch, hoofed a long ball down the field. He provided consistent performances, and any other squad member would say he was a vital piece of this team, but his praises oft went unsung amongst the fans. His mind had been made up to deliver the long ball after a fleeting moment of eye contact with his center forward. He would never have anticipated this, but a strange thing happened as the ball sailed down the pitch. For the twelve men vying for their team's first cup win in seventeen years, time slowed down. And through what felt like minutes despite lasting only moments, not one of those twelve could spare time for even a single thought. Their minds were blank, and their eyes were fixed on the flight of the ball.

In the middle of the park, the team's grizzled veteran of a holding midfielder slowed his run to a jog, and eventually to a full halt. Despite spending the last nine days sharing a bed with a woman whom he knew had cheated on him with his own brother (but was as oblivious to his knowledge as she was to how much heartbreak she had caused him), there was no tumult in his mind. It had all dissipated as he stepped onto the pitch almost 120 minutes ago. To him, the pitch was a sanctuary to anything the outside world might throw at him, and today, standing in the middle of his holy ground, nothing besides marking, tracking, and tackling would cross his mind. He craned his neck, and his eyes became fixed on the flight of the ball.

Fifty yards back, the goalkeeper stood anxiously at the edge of his six yard box. That he had kept his starting berth in the team was a testament more to his close friendship with their manager than to any outstanding performances. It was obvious to all that his form had obviously taken a dip after losing his son to leukemia midway through the season. Being a goalkeeper, he was afforded plenty of breaks in action throughout the course of a game. Though there were some easier than others, he had yet to make it through a match since losing his son without sobbing. This match was no different, and though his cheeks were still damp, he shed not a single tear as his eyes became fixed on the flight of the ball.

On the sidelines, the manager leapt up from his seat as the ball was sent forward. He did it with a lightheartedness betraying the fact that he was barely two weeks removed from a double knee replacement. He was an old man, but had grown comfortable with blocking out the pain. Which would be expected, after spending this season blocking out public speculation about the end of his career in management, as well as private speculation about the end of his own life. It was a worrying time period for him, but he felt a lucidity that he had not been able to find for a quite while as the ball sailed downfield. From behind his thick glasses, he fixed his eyes on the flight of the ball.

At the far end of the pitch, isolated from most of his teammates, the center-forward began to pick up speed as he ran towards the box. Isolation was a feeling the young striker had grown accustomed to. A highly touted prospect, he had arrived in January of the previous season, and found the net with ease in his first half-season. He was never able to replicate such form in his first full season, and his confidence continued to dip as the lambasting dished out by the local media became more and more severe. He could hardly sleep at night due to anxiety about being relegated to the substitutes bench, or worse, sold outright. Too often this season overthinking his course of action on the pitch had caused poor performances. In this moment though, there was no time to think. There was time only to fix his eyes on the flight of the ball.

What happened next was a blur. Not a single squad member was 100 percent sure if an elbow was used as the center-forward burst into the box and across the front of his marker, or which foot he used to volley the ball into the back of the net after a sublime piece of chest control. No one could exactly recall their first thought as the realization that they had scored in the dwindling minutes of a cup final dawned on them.