

Ari Fish *knows* he made starting goalie for his soccer team because of a rare and lucky trading card.

***BUT WILL THAT LUCK HOLD OUT  
WHEN THE CARD GOES MISSING?***



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# ONE

*"I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder  
I work the more I have of it."*

—Thomas Jefferson

Jerry Mac MacDonald has no pre-game rituals. He wakes up, jumps out of bed, and eats whatever looks good. Even though we have to be on the soccer field in forty-five minutes, he shows up at my house and starts playing solitaire on my computer.

"You're not going to believe it, Ari. I just got the fourth king."

I believe it. Mac is the luckiest person I know. Beyond lucky. Always in the right place at exactly the right time. But it's not just that. Girls think he is cute. Two weeks of school, the guy still has no homework. Most impressive: Even though the stakes could not be higher, he does not feel out of control.

Today is the all-important last day of tryouts for Somerset Valley select soccer, U-thirteen, Division One. I can't leave anything to chance.

Call me obsessive, but first I eat a bowl of frosted

cornflakes with half a cup of puffed rice and one-third of a banana, because this is what I ate before the first time I kicked a ball over Mac's head. Under my jersey, I wear my brother Sam's U Mass T-shirt, the one I stole out of his trunk the day he announced to my family that he was dropping out of college to fight California wildfires. Since Sam is still the highest scorer in league history, I do the same fifty push-ups he did. Then I recite the American presidents in order, first to last, while I stare at the poster of my hero, Wayne Timcoe, the only Somerset Valley High player to ever make it to the pros.

Mac thinks this is over the top.

"But I love the presidents. Tons of great athletes and leaders have crazy superstitions."

"Not as many as you do." He has a point. But if they work, they don't have to make sense.

I sit on my bed and stretch my hamstrings. Before we leave, I would really like to read my daily horoscope as well as "Steve the Sports Guy: Real Advice for Real Men." But today of all days, the paper is late.

It's an extremely bad omen.

Mac shouts, "I win!" He turns off my computer, and we run downstairs. He is halfway to the front door when Dad notices that Mac's socks look like he's worn them all week, which he probably has, since his mom never does laundry until it is an emergency. "Put these on, Blondie," he says, reaching into a hamper and tossing Mac an extra

pair. As we wait for him to change, Dad asks, “Are you ready to go?”

I stare at the empty curb, willing the paper to appear. If I am going to become Coach’s starting keeper, I need to read it.

“Can we wait five more minutes?”

Five minutes becomes ten becomes fifteen, becomes “Come on, Ari, you don’t need this. We’re going to be late.” We grab our gear, and my dad drives us to the field. All the way there, Dad showers us with his pearls of wisdom, the ones he never needed with Sam.

“If you play the way I know you can, Coach will have you both in the starting lineup. Just relax. You’ve worked hard. You are great players.”

Mac started last year. He says to me, “You are going to be the next Wayne.” Then he rolls down the window and waves to some random girls, who recognize him and scream his name. “There is nothing to worry about.”

I must look extremely morose, because when we are near the gas station, Dad slows down. “Ari, would you like me to stop for a paper?”

“It’s not the same.”

“Then could we please lose the gloom and doom?”

Dad does not understand the truth about soccer. You can work hard. You can have great skills. You can want it more than anyone else on the field. But the stakes are high. Only one player can start at each position.

There is plenty to worry about.

Soccer is a battle, like solitaire or fighting a fire or even becoming the President of the United States of America. No matter how qualified or ready or experienced you are, you aren't going to get anywhere unless you are lucky. Timing is everything.

Confidence is essential.

When Coach tells me to cover the south net, the one facing the broken Exxon sign, the one Wayne Timcoe called his "Home, Sweet Home," Mac thinks everything's settled. "You see? Didn't I tell you? That's got to mean something."

More than anything, I hope he's right. I want today to be the day that Mac's and Sam's and Wayne's and every single decent president's luck rubs off on me and I play my best. Win. Maybe post a shutout. I want Coach to stop seeing Sam when he looks at me. I want him to call me the Teddy Roosevelt of soccer, because that's how tough I am going to play.

More than anything, I do not want to play backup ever, ever again.

All I need is a little luck.

I am the most unlucky person in the world.

We're ten minutes into our only split squad scrimmage of the day, the score is three to two, them over us, and the sun is in my eyes. Naturally, Mac has the ball. He zips down the center of the field straight at me.

POW!

“Goal!”

A well-kicked ball makes a sound like a pop. When it flies past your ear into the back corner of the net, it whines.

Mac raises both his hands and pumps his fists. Our friends celebrate. “Nice.”

“Great job.”

“Right in the sweet spot.”

Mac and I shake hands. This is not because Mac feels guilty or because I think it is bad luck not to. Shaking hands with your adversary is Coach’s number one most important mandatory rule, what he calls the Valley way. He says sportsmanship is a vital component of competition, but the last time Sam was home, he told me Coach only cares about stuff like this when he’s got a questionable player on the team.

“Who are you calling questionable?” Sam and I were sitting around the kitchen table, making paper airplanes. Even though we were not supposed to launch anything in the house, I couldn’t resist. The rapier is the perfect plane. It flies like a glider, but it is as precise as a dart.

Sam’s airplane took a nosedive. “Do I really have to explain?” Not really. I knew he was talking about Mac. He said, “You know I love the guy, but you can’t deny it. When he’s not around to psych you out, your whole attitude changes.”

That surprised me. “You can’t blame Mac for being good.”

Sam crumpled up the paper and started again. “I wouldn’t, if he cared more about the team than his stats.”

Now Mac punches me in the arm like one more goal is no big deal. I grab the ball out of the corner of the net. It is slippery and wet and covered in mud. Mac says, “I swear, Ari, that ball was a fluke.”

“That would be your fourth fluke today.”

I hurl the ball as hard as I can, but of course, it hits a soft spot and stops dead two feet in front of my fullbacks. Abel Mischelotti, last year’s starting goalkeeper, sits on the bench right in front of my net. He yells, “Nice brick, Flounder. When are you going to learn how to throw?” His leg is in a red and white cast that starts at his ankle and ends at his hip. He points his crutch like a machine gun—straight at my head.

Mac says, “Don’t listen to him. Stay focused,” but he is the star of the team, good enough to play in the premiere league, if he wanted to. “Seriously, you’re doing great. You know if your brother was here, he would say the same thing.”

When someone says “Seriously,” you know they’re anything but. If Sam were here, he would not be losing to anyone, especially not Parker Llewellyn.

In the opposite net, she crouches low, keeps her feet moving the way all the best keepers do. She may be small, but she is also smart. She has already saved three goals outside the net.

Her throws are accurate.

In drills, she never drops the ball.

Parker moved here last spring, and after totally dominating the top girls' leagues, she petitioned the town and the league to play with us. She said, "I've played offense. I've covered the net. Now I am ready for a new challenge and some real competition."

Mac thought the whole thing was a joke—a publicity stunt. It didn't matter how amazing she was, no girl was ever going to play Division One. The league would have to turn her down flat—safety reasons—or locker room issues—take your pick! There were hundreds of good reasons to choose from.

But Parker is lucky too. The lady selectman was a big fan, and she figured it all out. She said on record, "Go ahead, Ms. Llewellyn, make us proud. Show those boys how the game of soccer is played."

Coach cannot give my job to a girl.

He blows the whistle, three long blasts. "Two more minutes. Let's see what you have left."

I keep my feet moving, ignore the taunts from the end of the bench, and count presidents. *Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe*. The opposing team kicks the ball south and east past both lines of defenders, to the corner of my side of the field. It hits an orange cone and ricochets out of bounds. Coach runs into my blind spot. "Corner kick blue!"

A corner kick is always a threat, especially when the kicker gets it to the leading scorer right in front of the—



Pop!

The ball stings my hands right through the gloves. I point to Eddie Biggs. “This one’s for you.” Eddie may have a tendency to talk too much, but he’s a great stopper—a smart defender and the best player on either defense. Some people make fun of him because he tapes his ankles all the way to the knees, but when I throw him the ball, he traps it—no problem—and kicks it clear across midfield, as far away from Mac as humanly possible. The guy is gold. He yells, “Let’s go, yellow team. Find your lanes. Concentrate! You can do it!”

Two goals against one girl should not be so difficult.

But my offense is playing like they belong in Division Three. The ball flies wide, then short, then wide again. Parker comes out of the net—no problem whatsoever—and kicks the ball away, and it’s a perfect kick, a booming kick, as good as any of mine. When it hits grass, Mac is in position. With a lane. And a line. And sixty-two seconds.

That’s an eternity for a scorer like Mac.

*Adams, Jackson, Van Buren, Harrison.* If Mac wanted to, he could dribble the ball around midfield and call it a day. Or he could head the ball out of bounds. It’s not like anyone would hold it against him. No one would blame him if he took off his blue vest, sat down, and let someone else challenge the net. But Mac’s not wired that way. He is a natural born winner. He never turns down a spotlight or a scoring opportunity or a chance to be the hero. Even when it’s against me.

He passes to Steve Campbell, aka Soup, who dribbles around one defender before passing the ball right back. Mac to Soup, Soup to Mac, crossing midfield, edging in. It really is beautiful. They already look like a team. Like winners. On the attack. I yell to the defense, “We’ve got twenty-seven seconds left.” *Tyler, Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce*. “Fill up the lanes—keep your eyes on MacDonald—don’t let him fool you.”

But that’s exactly what he does.

Just as two of my defenders take the bait and commit to blocking Soup, Mac passes the ball into the open space right behind Eddie. It’s an effective strategy. Eddie’s caught off balance. He can’t retreat. Mac races ahead and continues to dribble the ball. Sam taught him this trick in my backyard.

It leaves nothing but air between him and me.

I keep my feet moving. My hands are up. He’s going to go for it. But this is the home of Wayne Timcoe. This is his net. His field.

This is my chance.

I check his feet and then his eyes. If I can stop him, it will impress Coach and make me the starter. It will be the best kind of save. One on one. Him versus me.

Unless he is setting me up.

He could lure me over, just to get rid of the ball and let Soup try and score. Soup is an excellent athlete. Then again, he could look left and shoot left, kill the keeper with one swift kick.

What is it, Mac? What are you going to do? Are you going to kick it right or left? High or low? Into the corner or—

Jump!

The grass tastes like lettuce, but more bitter and stringy. Coach blows the whistle and Mischelotti yells “Yes” five or six times. Maybe more.

I put my head on the dirt. Game over.

My hands are empty.