

How to Tackle Your Dreams

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ROUND 1 STATS

Career Game Averages

Kicks: 8

Tackles: 3

Possessions: 9

Goals: 2

‘You have to go up and tell him.’

I crossed my arms. ‘Me? But you were the one who did it!’

‘But it’s your turn to take the heat!’

‘You’re the one who kicks the ball onto his roof like ninety percent of the time!’

‘Come on! He yells at you less.’

‘Hmm,’ I said, ‘maybe that’s because he knows you’re the one who’s always kicking the ball onto his roof?’

‘Ugh. Why are you such a jerk?’

‘Blame my parents.’

Mum snorted. ‘I am exceptionally good at that already.’ She sighed and looked over at Mr Huber’s house. ‘Do I *have* to?’

I nodded my head and pointed to his house.

‘Okay, but you have to be there as moral support.’

We went over and Mum knocked on the door. Mr Huber answered, in his usual outfit: a jumper way too warm for this

weather was tucked into pants that were way too high for this world. When he saw us on the doorstep he pulled his pants up even higher, which he liked to do before telling somebody off.

‘Mrs Schneider!’ he hollered. ‘Did your son kick a football onto my roof again?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Hey!’ I yelled behind her.

She hissed without moving her lips, ‘I’ll give you five bucks to spend at Maker Acre if you wear this one.’

Dammit, she’d got me. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Huber,’ I said, in my Very Good Boy voice. ‘I was just too excited about helping Mum train. You know it’s her big game this weekend, right?’

‘So I heard.’ He crossed his arms and glared at her. ‘Is your football team willing to pay for the damage to my roof?’

‘I’m sure there’s no damage,’ Mum said. ‘If there is, I promise they will.’

‘This is the *last time*, Mrs Schneider,’ he said, for the sixty-eighth time.

‘Thank you,’ she said, ‘you are too generous.’ She couldn’t help herself, though, and added, ‘but it’s not Mrs Schneider, remember? It’s Ms Falzon.’

‘Hmph.’ He grabbed at the door handle and said, ‘You better win after all this practice on my property,’ then slammed the door.

‘Want me to get the ball down?’ I asked, feeling a bit bad for her.

‘No way. If anyone’s going to fall through the roof and mess up Mr Huber’s day, it’s going to be me.’

I got the ladder from behind our place and held it for her while she climbed up and threw the ball back down. ‘Mum,’ I

called up, 'after this, can I go inside and finish up fixing my PE shirt? It's nearly done.'

'No way. You've got practice with your dad.'

'But I want to get it finished by tomorrow!'

'He only just knocked off work, remember?' She climbed back down and said, 'It's now or never, baby.'

'What if I'm already as good at football as I'll ever be and practise makes me go backwards?'

'I won't even pretend to answer that,' she said, putting the ladder back. 'So let's go.'



'Ten push-ups,' Dad said.

'But I just did twenty!'

'What's your point?'

'My point is that you're mean?'

He crossed his arms.

Mum said, 'Better do what he says. You know how he gets when he crosses his arms.'

I did the push-ups.

'Fifty star-jumps,' Dad said. When I'd finished those, he said, 'Ten squat-jumps.'

'Is he sweating enough?' Dad asked Mum.

She came up close and stared at my forehead. 'Doesn't look even slightly tired.'

'Mum!'

She grinned and punched me on the arm, then turned to Dad. 'Kick to kick, you reckon, Timo?'

'Dad usually asks me to do handballs now,' I put in.

‘We can do handballs,’ Mum said.

‘Make him work for them,’ Dad yelled.

We put the iPad up on a bench so Dad could watch us practise. Mum would punch the ball just out of reach, I’d run to it, and Dad would holler, ‘Go harder, Homer! You call that a handball? Get in front of her!’

After a while I just fell on the ground in a heap. ‘Get up,’ Mum said, poking me with the toe of her shoe. ‘This is practice for me too.’

Dad said something I couldn’t hear and I rolled along the grass over to the iPad. ‘Huh?’

‘How’s your Mum feeling about Saturday?’ he asked.

‘She’s pretending not to be stressed,’ I said, and she came over and sat on me while I yelled, ‘Hey!’

‘I hate it when he’s right,’ Mum told Dad, looking down at me. ‘Luckily, it doesn’t happen a lot.’

‘Hey!’ I said again.

‘You’ll be great,’ Dad said. ‘You’ve got the best coach.’

‘Yeah, Doug’s been really—’

‘I mean me,’ Dad said huffily.

She laughed. ‘Actually, Homer’s way more critical of my moves than you are. He’s probably the meanest coach of all of you.’

‘How do you think she’s going to go, Homer?’ Dad asked, giving me as much of a Meaningful Expression as you could hope for on a screen that kept making him go all blurry.

‘She’s going to be great,’ I said.

‘I feel sick,’ Mum said, rolling off me onto the ground and moaning. I picked Dad up from the bench and held him up so he could see both of us sprawled on the ground.

‘Why would you be nervous?’ Dad asked her. ‘It’s football, and you’re an expert at it.’

‘True,’ Mum said.

‘Except it’ll be on television and everyone will be watching you,’ I said helpfully.

‘Your whole life has worked towards this,’ Dad said. ‘All those years running and working out and learning to be a physio and playing sports, and now you’re here.’

‘Neither of you are helping,’ Mum said, covering her face with her hands. ‘What if I’m too old?’

‘You’re not,’ Dad said firmly. ‘And remember, you couldn’t even play national football when you were a teenager because women’s teams didn’t exist yet. You are doing it now and the team is lucky to have you. I am so excited to come over on Friday and watch you destroy the opposition.’

‘What if my shoulder isn’t up for it?’

‘What did your doctor say today?’

‘That it’s fine.’ Mum crossed her arms.

‘And how did it feel after your last training session?’

‘Completely normal.’

‘Hmm,’ Dad said. ‘Sounds like you’re going to kill it on Saturday. Unless, of course, you spend all your time lying around moping instead of practising.’

‘What if it turns out I’m better at moping than I am at football?’

I got up. ‘Then you’d have been drafted into the Australian Moping League,’ I said, ‘But you actually were drafted into the Australian *Football* League so I guess you must be really amazing at it?’

‘Stop being so encouraging,’ she said. ‘You’ll make me want

to start practising again. A few kicks?’

‘Dad would’ve said to do some running bounces,’ I said.

‘Homer,’ Dad said, ‘you can listen to what your mum says, you know?’

‘It’s okay,’ Mum said. ‘I can do some running bounces. And way faster than Homer can too.’

‘What?!’ I said, pretending to be super offended even though, obviously, she was way better than me.

Later, when we were both completely wrecked and Dad’s voice was hoarse from yelling loud enough that we could hear him, he croaked out a goodbye.

‘See you Friday,’ I said. ‘Nanna’s going to drive me to the airport to pick you up.’

‘When she buys you a muffin while you’re waiting for me to disembark don’t eat the entire thing,’ he said. ‘They’re full of unnecessary sugars and you need to stay health—’

‘BORING,’ I yelled.

He sighed, then looked at Mum. ‘I can’t wait,’ he told her. ‘You’re going to be spectacular.’

She grinned. We hung up, packed up the iPad and the footballs and all the other stuff and trudged back home again. While we walked, I watched Mum weighed down with all the gear and was about to tell her to stand up straight before I realised that’s exactly what Dad would say. He hadn’t walked next to me after training and told me off for slouching for so long that I almost missed it. I definitely missed him not helping lug all the gear home. Mostly, I missed him actually being at the home we got back to.

‘You really are going to be great on Saturday,’ I told Mum so I’d stop thinking about Dad.

‘I hope so.’ She bounced a ball in front of her. ‘I’m not usually a nervous person. But I’m feeling nervous about this.’

‘You don’t have to be nervous. You’re going to kill it. Remember all the years you spent ignoring me and playing sports? This is what that was for.’

Mum froze. ‘What?! I didn’t ignore you. Oh god, did I ignore you?’

She looked so devastated that I felt bad and said, ‘I’m joking! I didn’t feel ignored. I had Dad to help me out when you were at games or practice. And now...’ I stopped for a second and adjusted the bag of gear on my back. ‘Well, now Nanna and Pa can.’

‘While I still ignore you,’ she whispered.

This was all getting way more serious than I wanted, so I took out a cone from the bag, put it on my head like a hat and said, ‘I’ll cast a spell on you for your team to win on Saturday.’ I got out the skipping rope, stared at it in horror, and said, ‘Oh no, my wand is broken!’

‘You’re a goose,’ she said, but at least now she was smiling and not pulling her Sad Parent Face, which I’d seen a lot on both her and Dad since they split up. (But fifty percent less now that Dad moved away, which is, you know, good and bad.)

I whipped my skipping wand on the ground to distract myself from Sad Dad Thoughts and told her, ‘If you can make it home in four minutes, I guarantee you’ll win on Saturday.’

‘Four minutes?!’

I looked at my watch. ‘You’re losing precious time by complaining.’

She bolted. I strolled after her, lugging the bag of stuff, and thinking that if Dad had been here, he’d have made me run after

her. Instead, I got home to find Mum doing push-ups and saying smugly, 'Three minutes and forty seconds, thank you very much.'

Later that night, in bed, I sent Dad a goodnight text. When he was trying to convince me that him getting a job interstate would be fine, he explained that I should be glad, because he and Mum would give me a phone so I could call him whenever I wanted. Even though I'd been whining for a phone for years, I still looked at it sometimes and remembered that feeling in my stomach when he said that, like moving two and a half thousand kilometres away from me wasn't a big thing. Like he could buy me off with a phone.

Especially when I would've way preferred to have been bought off with a Switch.

Night, he wrote back. *Hope the rest of practice was ok.*

Pretty good, I said.

Check this out, he wrote, then sent a link for an hour-long video of some guy in a banana costume called HANK SHOWS YOU SOME AFL SKILLZ. There was no way I was going to watch it, but I wrote: *Thnx, I'll look at it in the morning.*

Love you, he wrote.

You too.

I got back out of bed and checked my uniform was ready for the morning. Usually I didn't care and just threw on whatever was in the mound of clean laundry on the couch, but I had big plans for tomorrow. The PE shirt was done, and my least ancient shorts were folded underneath it. I even had my cleanest white socks out for effect, and I'd rubbed my runners with a bench wipe so they were slightly less gross than usual.

Tomorrow was my day. And I was going to impress *everyone*.

ROUND 2 STATS

Hours Until Dad's Plane: 57

Every morning I rode my bike to meet Mario and Ng on the corner opposite school. We called it The Bad Corner, because it wasn't on school property and we were allowed to do as many illegal things there as we wanted. We hadn't actually come up with anything illegal to do yet, but we still had like nine months of Grade 6 left to figure something out.

Ng was always late, but Mario was there when I rolled up on my bike. He was eating all the best parts of his lunchbox so that he could pretend his Mum hadn't packed anything nice and steal somebody else's chips later. He wiped biscuit crumbs off his face and said, 'Why are you standing like that?'

'Like what?'

'Like you're trying to be on a movie poster or something.'

'This is completely normal for me,' I said, with one foot up on my schoolbag, my hands on my hips and my chest puffed out like a superhero.

‘What gives?’

‘Haven’t you noticed?’

He squinted. ‘Did you cut your hair?’

‘No.’

He stroked his chin. ‘Does . . . does your shirt look different?’

‘Yes! Look.’ I jumped up and down and ran on the spot and then pointed at my neck.

‘Mate! Your shirt isn’t even strangling you.’

‘I know! I fixed it!’

He reached over and pulled at my neck and investigated my sleeves and said, ‘How?’

‘I tailored it! I fixed the shoulders so they’d stop falling backwards.’

‘Why didn’t you do mine too?’ he whined.

‘I literally just finished mine on the weekend. I didn’t even know if it worked. But it feels great, and I’ll know for sure at the end of PE.’

Ng turned up, out of breath from running. His mum always dropped him off two minutes before the bell rang no matter how early or late they left their house, even if there was traffic or roadworks. It was her superpower, even if it was a pretty useless one.

‘What’s up with your shirt?’ Ng asked me. ‘Why is it different?’

‘I was sick of it always choking me, so I fixed it.’

‘How?’

‘Magic,’ I said.

‘Sewing,’ Mario added. ‘His Pa is a tailor, remember? I bet he did it.’

‘Nope.’ I shook my head. ‘It was all me. Well, ninety-six

percent me.'

'Rad,' Ng said. 'Can I wear it?'

'What? No!'

'Why not?'

'It's mine!'

'Ugh, whatever,' Ng said. 'When are you going to do ours?'

'Exactly,' Mario said.

I crossed my arms. 'What's in it for me?'

Ng gasped. 'How could you?' he said. 'Your very best friends? And you wouldn't just *help* us?'

'Remember that time you said your mum packed too many Tim Tams in your lunch box and I helpfully ate them all?' Mario said. 'And this is how you repay me?'

'That is *not* how I remember that day going down.'

The bell rang and we bolted over the road to class after another morning of not using The Bad Corner to its full potential. Mr Skia was clutching a coffee and wearing a blue shirt he hadn't ironed, black jeans and a pair of Converse sneakers and said, 'Boys, have you considered turning up to class *before* the bell rings?'

'All the time,' Mario said breezily, walking past him into the room.

Mario and I got into trouble a lot. It was hard to explain why, but it was probably because we didn't listen or pay attention and never stopped talking and always deliberately did the wrong things because they were funny. (Ng did all these things too but was way better at not getting caught.) I'd been extra awful last year when Mum and Dad were splitting up, and a real jerkjack over the summer when Dad had moved away and I was Working Through Things (as my psychologist said), but now I was just

back to being a normal, low-level rascal who stole pencils from the people on my table and blamed whoever I was sitting next to whenever I farted. This month, I was sitting on a table with Tom, K., and Thi, and they loved it when I did those kinds of things.

‘I got you a book for free reading,’ Thi said, pushing a copy of *Salvatore Rocco: Full Tilt Forward* at me. She held up *Left of Centre*, one of the other Sal Rocco books, and said, ‘Race ya.’

‘No fair! You already started.’

‘Should’ve got here early then, huh?’

Everything with Thi was a competition and she was annoyingly good at heaps of things I was also good at, like PE, so I didn’t even get to win all the time. One lunchtime last year we made a bet about who could kick the most football goals in a row. It took all lunchtime and still ended up in a tie, which was probably a good thing since we’d bet fifty bucks on it, and I only had the handful of money I’d been trying to save towards plane tickets for Dad to come over more, and Thi probably didn’t think have fifty bucks either.

When it came to reading she was definitely going to beat me, but the Sal Rocco books were my favourites and I’d already read *Full Tilt Forward* a bunch of times, so I kind of zoned out of this race until Mr Skia was suddenly beside me hollering, ‘Homer!’

I jumped. ‘Skia!’

‘Homer. Did you turn a single page in that book this whole time?’

‘A single page? Definitely.’

‘More than one?’

‘You’ll have to ask my lawyer,’ I said, pointing at Tom, who spent about 95% of his time telling everybody that his dad was a

lawyer and that he was going to sue them for things like stealing his pencils or blaming him for their farts.

‘I’m not asking Tom. I’m asking you. Can you make any text-to-self connections with your book today?’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘like this?’ I picked up my book and smashed myself in the face with it.

Everyone cracked up laughing and Skia raised one eyebrow very slowly and then pointed at it. ‘You see this?’ he said. ‘I couldn’t do that before this year. You alone have given me so many reasons to raise one eyebrow that I have become amazing at it.’

‘You’re welcome,’ I said politely.

‘Homer,’ he said again, in his this-is-the-last-straw voice. ‘Can you. Make any. Connections. With your. Book.’

‘Yes. I think Sal from my book would have found that pretty funny.’

‘Well done,’ he said. ‘And do you need to go to the sick bay after that stunt?’

My face actually hurt a lot but I couldn’t say that out loud, obviously. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Thi, can you make any text-to-self connections with your book?’

‘Yes. In *Left of Centre*, Sal’s friend Rhys joins the team halfway through the year and he’s nervous, and it made me think of Homer’s mum, who’s playing her first game this weekend even though the season’s already started.’

Skia said, ‘Homer, is it really this weekend?’

I nodded. ‘You going to watch?’

‘I am going to sleep all weekend,’ he said, ‘but I will be watching in spirit.’

‘I’m going to the game,’ Thi blurted out. ‘I can’t wait.’

‘Good text-to-self connection,’ Skia told her. ‘Or, as usual, good text-to-football connection.’

Thi beamed at me, and I smiled back at her. I was glad she was pumped about Mum’s game. I mean, generally, anything that made people pay attention to me was a good thing.

As long as they all stopped talking about Mum for long enough to notice how amazing my shirt was, then I would be blisteringly famous in no time. Posters. Storefronts. People everywhere talking about me for outfit reasons instead of talking about me for using craft glue and highlighter to make my hair stick up like Pikachu ears.

Fame was only one PE lesson away. I knew it.