

It was a warm Friday night at Victoria coach Station. We were embarking on a journey to the Liberté Cup, a football tournament which would bring together refugees from the La Linière refugee camp in Grande-Synthe and football fans from France, Ireland and England.

We had decided to take the overnight coach to Calais and then continue the journey on from there. I was meeting Neil a fellow Dulwich Hamlet fan whom I had never met before, but shared equal excitement about the trip ahead. We were travelling to Grande-Synthe near Dunkirk to a football stadium close to La Linière. My wife was rather worried about my the trip ahead due to recent news reports of road blocks and had passed on some of her concerns, although gladly when I saw that Neil was a tall man that looked like he could handle himself, my fears were somewhat allayed. In truth Neil was a gentle giant, amicable, easy-going, and patient and made for the perfect travel companion. Neil had been a fan for four years and had seen the club's rise and rise, in attendances, popularity and its mission overall. He was one of those new and exciting young fans that have really brought something to the Club. I was one of those old heads and so together we made the perfect blend. For me, I was coming full circle, it had been some 25 years since I had donned the famous Dulwich Hamlet pink and blue jersey to represent the Club, and to be honest I was feeling a little nostalgic.

When we checked in for the 23:30hrs service we learnt that Eurolines had cancelled the previous 22:00 service, and so both coaches had been merged together which meant our service was full all the way to Paris. Therefore, we would not sit together for this part of the journey, but little did it matter as this was supposed to be the part of the journey where we stole a march on some sleep! Unfortunately I sat next to a passenger that was fixated by the fact that both services had been merged. She was philosophising as to why it had happened, changing her mind over and over again going backwards and forth. All I wanted to do was sleep, but I'm not very good at telling people the honest truth in these situations! Gladly half an hour into the trip I managed to phase out the conversation, and we both got a little bit of shuteye on the way to Dover.

Getting through passport control was something of a formality and boarding even more so. Not that many passengers were going to France at that hour, and so as a result there was plenty of space on the ferry. Neil and I headed towards the front of the vessel, sat down on the comfortable seats and set about getting some shuteye for the 90 minute journey across the channel. Neil managed to fall asleep first almost instantly, and sure enough I found myself slowly but surely drifting off to sleep. Suddenly I received a sharp prod on my leg, it was the chatty passenger from the coach, what could she possibly want?! She had met another passenger from our coach on the ferry, and wanted to exchange phone numbers with her, only she didn't know her own phone number and neither did the other person. Her decision therefore was to wake *me* up out of all the other passengers she could've asked, in order to find out her number by searching through her phone! What's more, when I was naturally startled out of being woken up she was perplexed as to why I would be! After 20 minutes of fiddling around with her phone I was unable to ascertain her phone number, and suggested that she emailed her new found friend when we were all back on dry land.

We arrived in Calais at about 05:00 in the morning. The next leg of the journey was to get across to Dunkirk. Now, considering Calais and Dunkirk are neighbouring cities you would have thought that this would be relatively easy, but sadly this was not the case especially at 05:00! There were no local buses until 10:00, the only taxi service did not appear to collect passengers until 08:30 and so our only option was to walk to Calais-Ville train station and take the train from there to Grande-Synthe.

I had a rather large holdall, which was full of my own personal effects, clothes, toiletries and my own football kit. In addition to this I had nine other football kits, which belonged to the Dulwich Hamlet supporters' team and the bag belonged to Shaun. I promised him that I would bring everything back in one piece. I also had 12 bags of rice donated by fans at the FA Youth Cup game that were to be donated to the camp. So the bag itself was rather heavy, but because it had wheels it made it so much easier to carry.

We set off at 05:30 in the morning on the walk to Calais-Ville station, it had taken us 30 minutes to make a decision, and to help out some Singaporean tourists that were lost. We had been reliably informed by the clerk at the desk (or so we thought) that it was only a 15 minute walk to Calais-Ville station. This is probably correct if you don't include the spaghetti like network of roads and fences on the approach to the port complete with U-turns, S-bends and the odd chicane! No sooner had we past our first 300 metres of walking than the bag was having a few problems. The wheels were scratching and disintegrating until suddenly a quarter of a mile into the journey Neil noticed that rice was leaking from the bag! The wheels had busted so badly that the bottom of the bag had scratched on the floor, had a gaping hole in the bottom and before we knew it had lost a kilo of rice in a trail that we were later to find was 200 metres long! This meant that I had no other choice but to carry the bag for the rest of the journey, and believe you me, it weighed a tonne!

We then came to a drawbridge amid a queue of some five vehicles waiting to cross over the water. We believed that like most bridges it would shortly be lowered back to its original place, and we could all cross in a timely fashion. However, we waited 20 minutes for this to happen but to no avail! Car after car turned back, and ultimately it meant that we had to walk in another direction, which was very difficult carrying such a heavy bag!

We trudged along the water, finding another bridge instead; thankfully this was not a drawbridge! We crossed that bridge towards the centre before making our way to Calais Ville station. Now considering that we arrived in Calais port at about 05:00, and considering our train was at 07:13 hours, a 07:07 arrival at Calais Ville station was rather tight! We quickly bought our tickets and jumped on the train, one of those lovely clean TGVs that you get in France where you sit in second-class and you actually think you're in first!

After a 30 minute journey we arrived at Grande-Synthe station. I got an eerie feel about the place as I stepped off onto the platform, a platform that in truth was little more than gravel. We were still quite a way from the stadium and in no mood for anymore walking. It was a Saturday morning at a provincial train station but there was a dead calm about the place.....

Forty minutes had passed before we met Emily who thankfully agreed to give us a lift to the ground. She had been working for Big Balls Media and was one of the organisers for the event along with the helpful Lizzie and the affable Martino. Whilst giving us a lift to the stadium she explained a little bit about the tournament and a little bit about the region. We were surprised to learn that Grande-Synthe was a deprived area, as this was not something which was immediately apparent amid the rich French countryside with that typical palatial feel about the place. One can certainly imagine that with the juxtaposition of a refugee camp many in the local area might feel rather uneasy towards refugees. However, the Mayor himself had personally ensured that the tournament took place in the Stade Jean Deconick, an upgrade from the Stade du Moulin.

When we arrived at the stadium, there wasn't actually much to help out with. The diligent and benevolent Tom along with Fuze Beyond Borders volunteers had everything under control, and both Big Balls Media and Copa 90 had everything else in place. Our dozen packets of rice were warmly received, and so we were able therefore to relax a bit and catch up from the night's journey. We were still running on adrenalin and didn't want to sleep, but merely to sit down and rest for the next few hours before the tournament began. We spent a while getting to know some of the other organisers, hearing their own stories and how they became so deeply entrenched with the altruistic work of helping refugees. Another one of the organisations present was the World Wide Tribe, with one of the founders Dan running around the stadium assiduously. Dan has been all over Europe in the last twelve months selflessly helping refugees and internally displaced people. In fact, immediately after the tournament he was headed straight to Lesbos! It was amazing to meet so many hard-working and altruistic people that day, many of which had travelled all over the world for the aid of refugees, displaced people and other vulnerable groups. These people were such role models and were so inspiring to be around, hearing their stories and listening to their motivations was one of the highlights of the day.

After a while we began to see some middle-aged men walking into the stadium. They were smiling, joking, laughing and bouncing into the stadium one after the other. In my naïve disposition it took me quite a while to figure out that *they* were the refugees! Each of them greeted us or shook hands and they were all seemingly confident, excited, and energised for a tournament in their name.

I later learnt that they had been practising for weeks to play in this tournament and it meant a great deal to them on an individual and a collective level. It was reassuring to see that despite the various ordeals they had been through, they were able to enjoy the day. They were grateful for the fact that people had come from far and wide to show their solidarity with them. Many of them were so busy playing football that I thought I'd initially leave them to it before gradually beginning to engage with them. I learnt that the majority of them were Kurdish from Northern Iraq (or Kurdistan) and had a multitude of different stories to tell. At one point I was putting up the DHFC "Refugees Welcome" sign at the back of the main stand when one of the refugees shouted: "Refugees welcome? Refugees are never welcome!" and I instantly hollered back to him: "Well you're welcome at our club!" before exchanging smiles.

There was quite a clear process for picking each team, we were not just going to be representing our own clubs. You had representatives from each football club, followed by at least one woman from the Parisian based Les Dégommeuses women's team, and the remaining participants were the refugees themselves. Having said that it felt rather chaotic, as the noise levels of excitement often drowned out the process that followed. Unfortunately and somewhat inexplicably Neil and I were separated and so my team consisted of myself six of the refugees and one woman from the French club Les Dégommeuses.

Now, the Dulwich Hamlet supporters' football kits were aimed at our supporters and were therefore a mixture of large and extra-large shirts. The biggest of the refugees was large at best which meant every single shirt was bigger than each of the refugees. This meant a considerable amount of hang from each shirt! Copa90 had donated football boots for the refugees so that they could all look the part, like footballers. Ironically, I had failed miserably to fit in any of our long-sleeve extra-large shirts! I struggled so badly that in the end I had to settle for short a sleeve extra-large shirt!

The build-up to kick-off was something quite fantastic. All of the players gathered in the changing room which soon became a cacophony of noise, what with chanting, singing and dancing. At first I wanted to encourage our players to conserve their energy but then found myself joining in, riding on the crest of a wave, before sitting back to sample and soak in the atmosphere. I had never known an atmosphere like it in any changing room, especially *before* a ball was even kicked!

Soon afterwards we were let out onto the football pitch, each team standing in a line amid the fantastic support from travelling fans, locals as well as other people from the refugee camp. I had never known anything like it, a fantastic bone chilling moment. As we stood there a chant appeared to break out, before I realised it was a national anthem. I wasn't sure whether it was the national anthem of Iraq or whether it was a Kurdish national anthem. I soon noticed our #8 sitting on the floor looking rather subdued. He was the man who I'd earlier had the exchange with over the flag. I tried to encourage him to enjoy himself but there was something eating at him.

I began to speak to the Les Dégommeuses player in our side, who had only been playing football for three years and considered herself a novice. She was in fact very nervous about the fact that she was going to be playing with grown men, as she had never done so before.

We finally kicked off against the Sheffield based side Football Unites Racism Divides (FURD), who I may as well tell you now ran out to be the winners. Right from the kick-off they were clearly a much better outfit than we were and they were more organised. I knew from the outset our key was going to be hard and robust tackling, winning the ball and moving it quickly up to the forward to have an opportunity on goal. However while the hard robust tackling prevailed, few chances materialised. All

too often our players lost the ball dribbling in dangerous areas, and we were under pressure straight away. I wondered what that dribbling signified for our team - a team predominantly of refugees. Was it the rugged individualism, a sense of wanting to create something for oneself, the sense of being alone? The sense of only being able to rely on oneself? Was that why they all wanted to dribble? I cannot recall once when we lost the ball to an intercepted pass. FURD had a clear passing game and so eventually ran out 3-0 winners. Our robust style of challenge only got us so far and meant that there were clear consequences and injuries. As a result, we had a number of players hobbling towards the end of the game, many of them complaining that they had been the victim of fouls. The third goal came with about five minutes remaining and came from a lofted free kick that ended up sailing into the back of the net. Our players thought there was an injustice with this goal, because there had been an infringement. Our players deemed this unsporting and promptly stormed off the pitch bringing an abrupt end to the game. They had effectively given up and I was about to have my biggest challenge of the day... getting them back onto the pitch to continue the tournament.

When I had caught up with them in changing room they had all taken their kits off and jumped into the shower, claiming that they did not want to play in the tournament again. For a split second, and only a split second I was rather insulted. I had lugged that heavy kit a long way, and turned up with the very best of intentions, and as they marched off one by one into the changing room I felt momentarily hurt. Then I stopped to realise what had just happened. This was not about the fouls, indeed, if records would allow, we had probably been guilty of conceding far many more..... this was about self-esteem. These were men that were ultimately forgotten men, men that had been persecuted, left war torn countries on foot, trudging across Europe in search of a better life, a safer life; but ultimately what they had found were the squalid conditions of refugee camps in Calais and Dunkirk, before it must be said moving to the relatively more improved conditions in Grande-Synthe. These were men had been displaced, downtrodden, dejected, dishevelled and demoralised. This football tournament was a release from that, something to look forward to, one day out of life, the reality of their lives, and it had gone horribly wrong in the first game. My journey with the heavy bag clearly paled in comparison.....

The fouls were an easy excuse, the reality was that these men were failing to compete on what they thought was a level playing field. In truth the opposition, Football Unites Racism Divides, were a much better more organised side, and the way we played we were always going to struggle, but that didn't stop our men from admirable hope. With the hope somewhat vanquished, they had all given up. They felt as if life had given up on them... but *I* wasn't about to give up on them. For the success of the tournament, they needed to stay, for their own self-esteem they needed to stay. This was not about the winning, it really was about the *participating*, and this was *more* than a game. There were a lot of people that wanted to see these men succeed on the pitch, and I felt it was my job to ensure they did. Now, I'm not going to say that what I said to them was heroic, and I did not give one of those pivotal Hollywood speeches that turned the whole tournament around but eventually, what I said got them back on the pitch. They were all adamant that they were not going to return to the pitch and that they would not play under these conditions. Although in actual fact their gripe was about the righteous indignation of their perception of the unfairness of fouls. I needed to temper this by encouraging them not to give up and to work harder as a team in order to achieve victory. With the help of Martino and after a fifteen minute spell I managed to get them all but one of them to return to the pitch for the second game, via a sandwich and drink from the clubhouse. All of them that is, apart from the #8...

Shortly afterwards I caught up with our Les Dégommeuses player, Adrienne who had her own inhibitions about returning for the second game, not feeling good enough to play in a men's match. I spoke to her at length, reassuring her that she was truly capable, and she too agreed to return for the second game. It finally dawned on me that we probably weren't going to record any victories that day by way of goals, we were never going to win the tournament. The true victory was about making the team believe in themselves, believing that they could compete and getting them out onto the pitch again.

Despite the 0-3 reverse last time out, the team were out on the pitch again for the second match against Freedom United FC, a group of workers from the La Linière camp. Before the game, and to allay fears that there would be any unsporting conduct I asked the referee if we could line-up and shake hands with the opposition. I wanted our players to go into the game in the right spirit and completely forget the incidents in the previous game.

Very early on in the game we found ourselves 2-0 down to another superior team. I also found myself moved from midfield into defence for this game, which I took to being for the good of the team. Midway through the game, I moved the ball out of the defence and passed it left to Adrienne. She controlled the ball, cut in from the left and played an exquisite slide-rule pass to our No.9. He took one touch with his right, before sweetly striking with his left to make the score 1-2. We were all so jubilant and celebrated in an inconceivable way for a team that was still losing in the game. It was a release for everyone, a brilliantly worked goal and a realisation that we could at least compete. Everybody on our team celebrated the goal and you could see it meant so much to the team as a whole. We went on to lose 4-1 but I have rarely seen a team walk off the pitch with such confidence having just lost by that margin.

It was at that moment I realised that the victory was not in the result. The victory was in momentarily at least bringing these men back to life, giving them something to cheer about. Making them believe in themselves again and regaining their aplomb.

With two defeats, our third game was an all-or-nothing game where we had to win by a large score line to have any chance of qualifying out of the group. We quickly found ourselves two goals down before a moment of inspiration, I dribbled forward from the back, taking on two players before playing a ball with the outside of my boot over the heads of two defenders, landing at the feet of our No.9 who unduly slipped the ball into the goal under the advancing goalkeeper. Cue wild celebrations from our team but none more so than me. For the last three years I had played almost exclusively as a goalkeeper due to a void in various teams that I play for. Over this period I have gained weight, lost my own confidence and moved a long way from being the outfield player that I used to be. I didn't realise how much that assist meant to me until I joined in with the celebrations. I myself needed the same confidence boost that the rest of my team had. Unfortunately, despite needing to win by a large margin we instead went on to lose by one, and our tournament was over with three comprehensive defeats. However, the team still left the pitch happy with their heads held high. We all felt rejuvenated in some way and despite our adverse results the tournament had been a huge success.

Before and after the third game I sat down with the team to find out a little bit more about them. Who they were and how they ended up at the La Linière camp. I wanted to understand, and be ready for the answer as to what had shelved their confidence so much. Collectively they gave me a censored sound bite of the horrific stories that preceded their arrival in La Linière. Stories of families torn apart by conflict, family members killed before their very eyes, desperate attempts to leave their homeland and dinghies capsizing in the Mediterranean. The stories were a real reality check for me, I knew what I would be getting into by asking them but I didn't realise how much it would bring things home for me. The people in the images I had seen countless times on the news now had names. They were the No.9 that played up front, or the #5 that played at the back, or the #7 that couldn't control his anger, or the #11 that was distant on the wing. I tried to imagine just what it was like for them and my heart sank, it really took something out of me to listen to them, to know that these men had been through such strife and trauma that was their lives.

One of most poignant memories from that day was finally catching up to the #8. I wanted to know why he was the only man not to return to the field. He sat out the second and third game in the stands but I'm not sure how much supporting he actually did. He didn't really give me an answer, and though we tried our best to communicate the conversation was tough going. He did however leave an indelible image in my mind with something he described. At a juncture in the conversation he suddenly started: "You know I have dreams...the same dream many times...I sit there...and a hand comes to take me...a French hand...to take me...to take me I don't know where..."

Though these men are living on a refugee camp, they know that this is not permanent. They do not want it to be permanent; they just want a better life somewhere, anywhere safe. They don't want to be victims, they don't want to give up, they want to stay on a level playing field and compete. The daily fear and uncertainty that these men go through may have been put on hold by the tournament, but sadly it was something each man would have to go back to. The Liberté Cup gave them all hope, and a sense that life could be different and I implored them all to hold on to this. I gave each man a Dulwich Hamlet badge when I said goodbye, to remember me and to remember Dulwich Hamlet Football Club, a place where refugees are welcome, everybody is welcome. I didn't need anything in return, because they had already given me something...a memory that will live with me forever...and a group of men I will never forget.....

The names of the refugees have been deliberately omitted to protect their identities.