



WELCOME

TO
THE
BLUE
HEAVEN

*Don't Bet Against
the Goalkeeper*

JIMMY NIELSEN
WITH PAOLO BANDINI

Foreword by Robb Heineman, CEO, Sporting Club



“As highly as I rate Jimmy as a goalkeeper, I think he’s been an even better leader for the team. All the guys respect him, he doesn’t shy away from difficult situations, and he’s a real connector of people. Instead of excluding guys, he brings everybody together and makes sure they all feel involved in the group.

“There are certain qualities that you look for in a player. You ask, ‘Can he play the game? Does he have a good character? Is he personable? Is he marketable?’ To get a full package like you get from Jimmy is rare. It’s a benefit on all levels to the club, the organization, the community, the city and the team to have a guy like that on your roster.”

—*Peter Vermees*, **SPORTING KANSAS CITY MANAGER**

“Obviously Jimmy Nielsen is a phenomenal goalkeeper, but it’s the person he is outside of the white lines that makes him the ultimate fan-favorite. He’s not afraid to speak of his past and share how those lessons shaped him into the person he is. His humor, winning drive and charisma demonstrate his world-class leadership for our team and our community.”

—*Mike Illig*, **SPORTING CLUB OWNER**

“Jimmy just jumped right in, engaging with the fan base from day one. I find him to be an incredibly sincere person. I never feel like he’s big-timing you. He’s a gentleman who’s played at the highest levels in the world and is still more than willing to just talk. He’s really interested in what you have to say as a fan, and you don’t find that very often in players of any sport. He also buys us beer ...”

—*Sean Dane*, **KANSAS CITY CAULDRON MEMBER**

“The White Puma has been the cornerstone of the team. His on-the-field play has earned him recognition as one the league’s best keepers. The leadership and supporter engagement has solidified his spot as a favorite within the city. We’re fortunate to have him on the team and in the community.”

—*Clay Patterson*, **SPORTING CLUB OWNER**

“I am extremely proud to be his wife, but I can’t pretend it’s always been easy. As Jimmy explains in this book, his gambling continued to get a lot worse in the first few years after we got married. Every time he told me he was going to quit, I believed him, because it always felt like we had such a great relationship when he wasn’t placing bets. Everything was perfect when we were together, but when he was gambling, he forgot that anything else even existed. He would miss family birthdays, parties, everything, because he lost track of time.

“But I always believed that if we worked together, he could get out of it, whereas if I left, he would have no chance. There would be no reason to stop. What do you do in that situation? He was still the big love of my life, the one that I recognized as soon as I first saw him at the age of thirteen. What do I love about Jimmy? Oh boy, do you have all day?”

—*Jannie Nielsen*, **JIMMY’S WIFE**

“He genuinely cares about everybody. He is easy to talk to and he is always there when you need him. He’s been around and he has a lot of stories. He leads by example and treats everyone equally.”

—*Teal Bunbury*, **SPORTING KANSAS CITY FORWARD**

“All captains are leaders on the field, in the clubhouse and with management. The quest to bring championships and glory to a club is a journey that may take, in many cases, years to complete. A good captain is a leader on that journey, and a great one doesn’t mind the scars that are accumulated along the way. Jimmy Nielsen is my captain, but I’m far more fortunate to call him my friend.”

—*Robb Heineman*, **SPORTING CLUB CEO/OWNER**

“Jimmy is an outstanding goalkeeper, and we are very fortunate to have him on our club. But more than being a good goalkeeper, he is an excellent leader, captain and person. He is great for our team and the community. Every time he speaks and represents our organization, we feel fortunate to have him here.”

—*Kerry Zavagnin*, **SPORTING KANSAS CITY ASSISTANT COACH**

“Jimmy is the epitome of an all-around athlete. First, he seems to know where the ball is headed before the player making the kick does, which means he’s done his hard work and has a true natural gift. Secondly, our children are in the same class, which gives us a unique look into each other’s lives. Jimmy’s dedicated relationship with his family and our school community reflects the same energy and strong commitment that he shows on the field. Jimmy and his family are fast becoming a Kansas City treasure.”

—*Greg Maday*, **SPORTING CLUB OWNER**

“He’s a great guy, father and husband. He has been great for this organization. The fans love him, the players love him, and he is an amazing presence in the locker room. He is very easy to work with. I couldn’t ask for more from a goalkeeper.”

—*John Pascarella*, **SPORTING KANSAS CITY GOALKEEPER COACH**

“Jimmy is a great player and an even better person. He is a great captain who cares about his team more than anything. He is a great leader on and off the field. There couldn’t be a better guy back there between the pipes.”

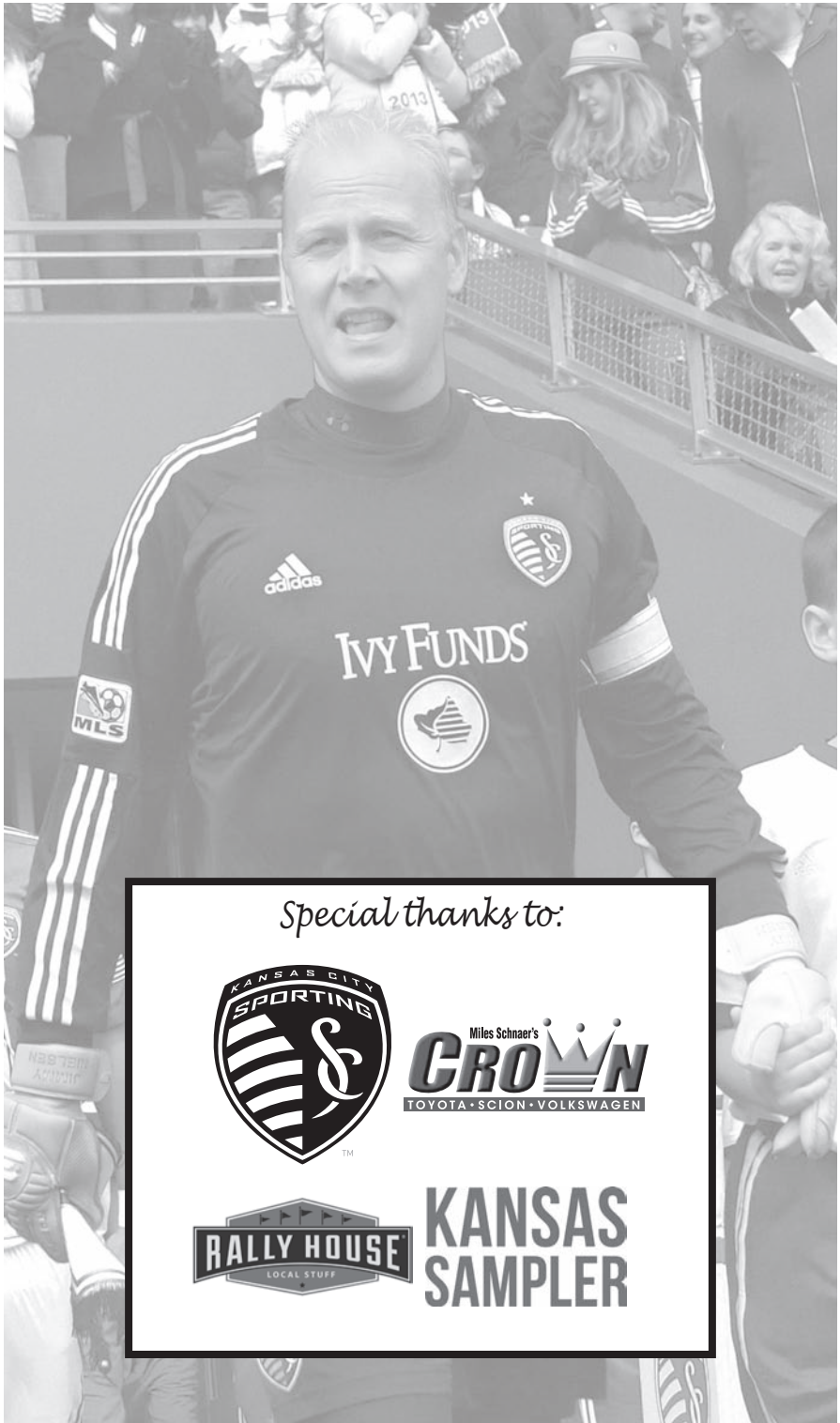
—*Graham Zusi*, **SPORTING KANSAS CITY MIDFIELDER**

“Jimmy Nielsen, with his entrancing light hair and signature bear hugs, embodies all the qualities that would go into creating the quintessential professional athlete and off-the-field personality: interesting, competitive, friendly, unselfish and genuine. Quick to stop shots while plying his trade, but even quicker to smile, the ‘White Puma’ has become a fan-favorite in Kansas City, while setting Major League Soccer records in the process. People watch him on the field and recognize a great goalkeeper, but he truly makes his mark on the type of man he is to every single person he encounters.”

—*Rob Thomson*, **SPORTING CLUB EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
OF COMMUNICATIONS/DIGITAL**

“Jimmy Nielsen is the perfect ambassador for the club: personable, professional and downright good at what he does. His actions often speak louder than words. The 2012 MLS Goalkeeper of the Year still makes time for anyone. He truly is someone who everyone, young and old, should look up to, and we are so lucky to have the White Puma as our captain.”

—*The Curran Family*, **SPORTING CLUB OWNERS**



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Photo courtesy of Gary Kohman

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DEDICATION

This book is for my wife Jannie, our wonderful daughters Mille and Isabella, and also for all of the wonderful friends we have made in Kansas City. Thank you for making us feel so very much at home.

FOREWORD

Jimmy Nielsen is my captain; a simple word but with a layered narrative that is anything but simple. What does it mean to captain Sporting Kansas City? Surprisingly, the official FIFA Laws of the Game are virtually silent on the role of the captain. They pragmatically state that the captain has “a degree of responsibility for the behaviour of his team.” The degree depends on the man, of course. All captains are leaders – on the field, in the clubhouse and with management. The quest to bring championships and glory to a club is a journey that may take, in many cases, years to complete. A good captain is a leader on that journey, and a great one doesn’t mind the scars that are accumulated along the way.

Years ago, lying in the morning grass in Aalborg, warming up for another training session and perhaps reflecting on his career as a top-flight Danish League goalkeeper, I’m sure Jimmy never expected the twists and turns that he was about to experience in the next leg of his career journey. But for better or worse, it has been these spirals along the journey that have made Jimmy into what he is today: a brilliant, gentle giant, a family man with arms and legs of rubber that have broken the hearts of so many foes, and given rise to cheers for even more.

When Jimmy arrived in Kansas City on a February winter’s day in 2010, he replaced a fan-favorite goalkeeper, and we were playing our home matches in a minor league baseball stadium. Yet not once did I hear anything from Jimmy other than appreciativeness for the opportunity to be a part of our club. Jimmy helped lead a movement to make Kansas City, previously a destination which international players were never interested in, the place to play in Major League Soccer.

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In three seasons with Sporting Kansas City, Jimmy has electrified Sporting Park – diving-saves, kick-saves, double-saves, we’ve seen it all. They’ve tried everything to beat him, even an ill-conceived bobblehead toss that hit him in the eye couldn’t keep him down. Jimmy helped us #PaintTheWall, and more silverware seems inevitable with him in the net. Jimmy has been everything we could have asked for in a netminder and a captain, and he surprised us with even more. Maybe the biggest and most pleasant surprise has been Jimmy’s focus on winning above personal statistics. Despite the fact that Jimmy consistently ranks near the top of the League in all meaningful statistical categories, such as goals against average, saves and shutouts, Jimmy remains sharply focused on only one statistic: wins.

Save upon save. Win upon win. And yet, it’s not just the moments with all eyes upon him that make Jimmy special. It’s the quieter moments that happen with no one around that are the true measure of the man, like when Jimmy stops in a park to teach kids so they can one day be captains, too. It’s strolling through the Country Club Plaza with family in hand, not like the modern day superhero he is, just simply a man. It’s staying after practice for an hour just so kids can take penalty shots on a real professional soccer icon – and diving for each one and juuuust missing. For a person from such a foreign land, he’s become our native son, and the city, the club and his teammates love him for it.

Jimmy Nielsen is my captain, but I’m far more fortunate to call him my friend.

Robb Heineman
CEO, Sporting Club

1

THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE GERBIL

“If they kill that gerbil, I’m going to throw a bomb in the airport.”

In the long list of ridiculous things I’ve said throughout the years, that sentence might just be the most absurd. For starters, I don’t know how to make a bomb. More importantly, I had no intention of blowing up an airport. In fact, I was well aware it’s the sort of thing you shouldn’t even joke about.

But those were the exact words I told our team administrator, Rick Dressel, when he pulled me aside in the middle of a Kansas City Wizards (as the team was then known) practice session in March 2010. I had only been with the club for a little over a month, and things were going great. I loved my new teammates. My family had recently flown out to join me in the US, and life was feeling pretty perfect. Or at least it had been until Rick informed me that the staff at the Atlanta airport was about to murder my daughter’s gerbil.

This was no ordinary pet. Otto was, without doubt, the most expensive gerbil ever to have lived. We didn’t know it when we bought him. Back then, Otto cost the same as any other gerbil, about \$50 when you include the cage, the water bottle and all the other basic supplies. But getting him to America? That took thousands of dollars.

It all began when I told my family that I had received a contract offer from Kansas City. I had been playing for a team in my native Denmark, and it would mean a big upheaval for my wife and two little girls if I were to accept. I gathered them around and explained the situation. Everyone seemed excited, but my eldest daughter, Mille, had one concern. She was only willing to go if Otto could come with us.

“Of course he can,” I replied. “No problem.”

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But it turned out to be a really big problem. Getting Otto to America had taken up more time and energy than I could ever have imagined. We had filled in countless forms and paid so many fees. We took Otto to the vet over and over again just so he could pick him up, look at him for five seconds and sign another sheet of paper. We had to book special animal airplane tickets, which cost more than you would pay for a human. In total, we spent more than \$3,000, and my wife Jannie's parents wound up paying a couple more bills for us after we'd left Denmark, too.

And now, after all that, the authorities at the Atlanta airport wanted to kill Otto because they couldn't find his paperwork. Rick had been speaking to them on my behalf while I was out at practice, but they had told him that they were going to put the gerbil down unless they received the relevant forms within the next hour.

I couldn't get out of practice, so I had to send Rick to talk to them again. I told him to repeat exactly what I had said about the bomb in the airport, but I'm sure he was clever enough not to. Either way, he managed to persuade them to wait a little while longer. When the session was over, I came inside and started making phone calls. I got my wife, Jannie, to call her mom, since she was the one we had left in charge of getting Otto on the plane.

It turned out the paperwork had been taped to the bottom of the cage; the authorities in Atlanta hadn't thought to look. Because of the delay, Otto had now missed his connecting flight, so we had to pay another \$200 for him to stay overnight with a vet in Atlanta. Two hundred bucks! You can stay in a five-star hotel for that kind of money.

Still, Otto made it out to Kansas City in the end, and Mille was so happy, it made the whole thing worthwhile. Otto was already two years old by this point, and most gerbils don't live much past that age, but he carried on to the age of five. We didn't replace him after that. My family loves animals – we have two cats and a dog at home – but I can promise you that we will never get another gerbil. Rest in peace, little Otto.

As expensive as he was, it's also true that I've wasted far greater sums of money in much more regrettable ways. As a recovered

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gambling addict, I know all about bad financial decisions. There have been times in my life when I lost more than \$100,000 on bets in a single afternoon. Where bringing Otto to America delighted my family, gambling nearly destroyed it.

It was only by giving up gambling completely that I was able to save my marriage. And it was only by relocating my family from Denmark to Kansas City that I was able to save my soccer career.



Here he is: the world's most expensive gerbil. It cost us thousands of dollars to transport Otto from Denmark to Kansas City, but you can see how delighted my daughter Mille was on the day he arrived. Otto had two happy years with us in the States, and it was a very sad night for all of us when he finally passed away. That little gerbil was a part of our family.

2

A CHILDHOOD OBSESSION

When I was ten years old, we had a lesson at school where our teacher, Ms. Else, asked us each to come to the front of the class and write on the board the top three jobs we wanted to do when we grew up. Some of the kids had no idea at that age, but I didn't need to consider my choices for even a second:

- 1) Soccer player
- 2) Soccer player
- 3) Soccer player

Ms. Else was not impressed. She had been my main teacher right through from kindergarten, and she was this tough little lady in her 50s – always very fair, but not someone you wanted to get on the wrong side of. I refused to put down any other jobs because I knew that being a soccer player was what I wanted to do. She got so angry that she called my parents down to the school, where they were given this big talk about how they had to help me get my priorities in order.

“He has to focus on school now,” she said. “What are the chances that he can really go on to become a professional soccer player? Physically he is here in the classroom, but his mind is always elsewhere, always dreaming about soccer. Look at his notes! There is nothing on them except drawings of soccer games.”

She was right about my schoolwork, even if she was wrong to doubt my career choice. I was not a difficult kid to have in the class – I didn't scream or shout and disrupt the lessons – and I always suspected that Ms. Else quite liked me because I was well-behaved and friendly. But I didn't pay attention to what she was teaching us. Instead I would sit

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quietly, drawing out different formations and coming up with tactics for the teams I played for.

I thought a lot about the strategic side of the game, and when we got out onto the fields I would always be bossing the other kids around, telling them where to go and what to do. I was obsessed with soccer, but I was also obsessed with winning. I've always hated losing, be it soccer, cards, or anything else.

People ask me sometimes where I think that comes from, but honestly I have no idea. My father was a big soccer fan, but he never really played any sport to a high level. Mom had no interest in sports, and my parents used to have big arguments over how much I played. They had one that night after we came home from Ms. Else's classroom. My mom was telling him how worried she was, but my dad was just there going "uh-huh, uh-huh," not really listening. That made her even angrier.

My parents were, and still are, completely different people. I always say that my dad is the oldest teenager in the world, because he acts like a big kid. He is in his 50s now, but every Friday he goes and gets his haircut, dresses up in his new clothes – trying to look sharp – and can spend all day hanging out with people. He is a very funny guy, always cracking jokes, always the life of the party, and he just knows how to get on with people, young or old.

He is also very loud. I had one brother, Johnny, who was five years younger than me, as well as a step-sister, Heidi, who was five years older, though she did not live with us growing up. In the morning, it was normally my mom who came to wake me and my brother up, but if she was out, then my dad, instead of coming to our rooms, would shout from the kitchen of our apartment:

"JIMMY! JOHNNY! IT'S TIME TO GET UP!"

I used to lie there thinking: *Oh, no*, but he would keep on going, so loud that the whole building could probably hear him.

"COME ON! COME ON! WAKE UP!"

"I am awake."

"I DON'T SEE YOU! GET UP! GET UP! GET UP!"

My mom is the complete opposite of my dad in almost every way. She's small, she's quiet, and she rarely shouts. Maybe once in a whole

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year she might lose her temper and shout a little bit, and when she does, you listen. I suppose they both shared an interest in fashion, and she was always very well dressed.

But as unusual as it sounds, the family member I played soccer with the most when I was little was my grandmother. My parents owned a few bars and nightclubs together – that was what they did for a living – so if they were out at night managing those, I would usually get left with my granny, who lived in another apartment right across the street. I spent a lot of time with her growing up, to the point that she was like a second mom to me. I have nothing but good memories of the time I used to spend with her. We were so close that, when I first started playing soccer at around three years old, I only wanted to do it if she could join in as well. She needed crutches to get around at that time, so rather than play outfield, she would go in goal. She used the crutches to her advantage, lifting them up and knocking away shots with them.

I remember very vividly the time when I accidentally hit her in the face with the ball. It was just us two that day, with me taking shots and



I was lucky that I always got along with my two siblings. My brother Johnny was a professional soccer player himself but was forced to retire early due to knee injuries. My stepsister Heidi is a psychiatrist. She definitely paid more attention at school than I ever did.

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her trying to save them with those crutches. She didn't normally wear her reading glasses when she went out, but for some reason she did that day, and the ball smashed them right up into her face. She got this big cut just above her eye, right in the corner next to her nose. The glasses were completely broken, too. She was bleeding quite badly, but our plan had been to go play a little soccer and then get an ice cream, and she still took me for the ice cream. She was holding a piece of paper up against the cut with one hand and eating her ice cream with the other. That's what she was like: a tough lady who wouldn't even have thought about rushing off to the hospital or anything like that. And she never let that incident put her off from playing soccer again. The next time I asked, she was back in goal and stopping shots with those crutches.

As I got older, of course, I played less with my granny and more with my peers. At four years old, I joined the kids' team of the local professional club: Aalborg BK. It's a gigantic club – the biggest for 100 miles in any direction – and they have a huge youth setup, with an Under-5 team, an Under-6 team, an Under-7 team and all the way up to the Under-21s. European soccer clubs like to get hold of kids young, before anybody else has a chance to spot the talented ones!

Everyone in our city supported Aalborg. It's funny to think about it now because, to me, Aalborg is not a tiny city – in fact, it is the fourth-biggest in Denmark – but the whole country is on a completely different scale than the United States, and more people live in the state of Missouri than in the whole of Denmark. I think the population of Aalborg is about 175,000 if you count all the suburbs around the main city.

But perhaps because Aalborg is that size, it is also one of those places where the soccer team really means everything. Denmark is not like the United States, where you have lots of different sports like football, baseball and basketball competing for people's attention. Soccer is the No. 1 sport by a long way, and you can feel the whole mood of the city lift when Aalborg is winning. But when it's losing, you can walk around town all day and not see anybody smile.

I would eventually grow up to be their starting goalkeeper, but back then I was playing outfield, and my career was nearly ended before it had even begun. I was still just four or five, and I don't even really

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remember what happened, but I was playing in a game one day when suddenly I took a ball really hard to the face. Unlike my grandmother, I did not soldier on. In fact, I decided then and there that I did not want to play soccer ever again.

Just like that, I quit playing for the Aalborg Under-5 team. But, of course, I was still fascinated with soccer, so I would still watch games on TV and play on my own in my room at home, kicking a ball against the wall or whatever.

Then, about a year later, I started school. All my friends there were playing for the same youth soccer team, B52, and they started asking me to come down and join in. I thought about this a little bit and said, “I will only play if I am allowed to go in goal.”

Somewhere along the line I had come to the conclusion that if I could protect my face with my hands, I would never again get hit by the ball like I did on that day with Aalborg. I should have known better from what had happened to my granny at the park, but I suppose I just thought that she couldn’t protect her face because of the crutches.



The first team I ever played for was the Under-5 side of our local professional soccer club, Aalborg. I didn’t always play in goal back then, but I guess I did on this particular day, because I’ve got the gloves on.

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Of course, the reality is that goalkeepers get the ball kicked at their face more than any other position, but at five or six years old, I hadn't worked that out yet. If I had, then that probably would have been the end of my soccer career right there and then!

In any case, my friends were very happy. They didn't have a goalie at that time, so straight away I became the starter. I was pretty tall already, which helped a lot at that age, and from that day on I have always been in goal – whenever I was playing seriously, anyway. As I got older, I would gradually start playing outfield again in casual pick-up games with my friends.

I have to say, though, I had an awesome childhood. The neighborhood where we grew up – Gug, a suburb of Aalborg – was so safe, and it was mostly families with kids, so I had lots of friends nearby. We had this huge park where we could go and play soccer, and it was close enough that we could just get a few guys together and walk over there. Very soon it was where I would spend all of my free time.

My friends and I would be out there every day – we didn't care if it was sunny, raining or snowing. There were a few kids who would always go down there with me, including my best buddy, Mikkel. He was not quite as crazy as I was about soccer because he wanted to grow up to be a teacher. His parents are teachers, his aunts and uncles are teachers, everybody in his family is a teacher. Now he is a teacher, and his wife is a teacher, too. Now that I think about it, I suppose it's quite funny that my best friend should be a teacher, given how little I used to care about school!

But Mikkel lived right across the street, and even if he wasn't quite as obsessed with soccer as me, he was still always ready to play. We would head out to the park and have these ridiculous, epic games that went on and on. We would play anybody who wanted to have a game against us, which sometimes meant that we would be up against a team of much older boys. I loved that. You should always want to play against people who are better than you, because that is how you improve and learn new things.

Since I hated losing so much, we always had to keep playing for one more goal and until my team had the lead, no matter who we were up

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against. Sometimes that meant carrying on even after it got so dark that you could barely see the ball and their players had started to quit and head home. We just kept going and going. Then finally we would score to take the lead, I would whistle and that was it, full-time. I never lost in those games.

Looking back now, it is a little crazy how long we spent out there on that field. There were no adults looking after us: we just played on our own until well after dark. I would not let my kids do the same thing nowadays because it is just not safe. The world has changed, sadly, and I feel very lucky to have grown up in a time and place where it was possible to be like that and not have to worry about it.

That said, even if things had been different when I was younger, I'm certain I would have found ways to play. As it was, I would soon start skipping school so that I could practice even more than I was already. When you have something inside you like I had with soccer, you cannot keep it shut away.



Howdy partner! This is one of the earliest pictures I have of my childhood, and for some reason, I'm dressed as a cowboy. We don't really celebrate Halloween in Denmark, so I must have just liked that outfit.

