

Field of Combat

Athletic competition has always made me uncomfortable. You see, there is a contradiction between being a good sport and playing to win—an obvious one. But try explaining that to your coach. You'll be blacklisted as subversive, the one without team spirit. She just wouldn't get on board, they'll say. So I trudge along, bewildered at my own shameless dislike of competition, and yet desirous of approval. I am fickle, a tad bit neurotic, proud of thinking independently but far too cowardly to do anything but capitulate. I find myself warming up with my team for the big game, a secret agent, a player devoid of true fidelity to any sport, compliant nonetheless. The game begins.

TWEET!

The desire to win is fierce and unrelenting. My group moves back and forth without scoring, an undulating mix of determination, action, and despair. The first half is practically a title fight. We check when checked, pound when pounded, bouncing off of our opponents with the determined recklessness of drunken men angered to fist fighting. The first half ends. The score: 0-0. Coach has things to say: readiness, stamina, fight to win.

Trudging onto the field, I can feel the tension building. "It's now or never," I tell myself. Action. The girl's faces move here and there, a blur of kinetic, feverish energy, each one determined, each one brave. My team pushes up. Coach's voice is shrill with an odd mixture of desperation and hope. The game is a stalemate. Shootouts result.

I try not to show it but terror and fear fill my entire body. In through the nose and out through the mouth: my mantra for breathing under stress. I say it over and over.

I'm in goal first, staring into the striker's eyes. She looks to the right, then to the left, but then quickly glances back at the right hoping I won't notice. Her cunning doesn't escape me. She

shoots. I dive and make the save. The crowd goes crazy. The other goalie saves the next shot and the next two after that. On the fourth shot though, she lets one in. The same thing happens to me. I let one get by me.

The last striker and I stare each other down. So much is on the line, and we can both feel it. I take one more deep breath, close my eyes, and prepare for the girl to take her shot. She takes two steps to the left and one back. Sprinting to the ball, she boots it ferociously.

BAM!

She kicks it straight to me. My team rejoices with glee. All that is left to do is put victory in my striker's hands, trusting in the outcome.

Focus is written all over my teammate's face. She squints her eyes, surveilling the scene with intensity, scanning the place like a guard on a watch tower. Her shot is feigned and then sent home with trickery to the opposite end of the goal. Score. The crowd, my team, and the bystanders who have no relation to the game, burst out with joy. We win. But victory is always cruel. My counterpart dejectedly moves away from the lighted field, wanting to hide, wanting to explain. All my fault, she thinks, kicking herself with a disapproval that no coach could ever muster.