

## The Other Side of the Pitch

From his back garden Jack could see the floodlights of the stadium in the distance. Every Saturday, the city's heart beat in that arena - singing, chanting, roaring for the heroes in blue. For Jack, eleven years old and already a devoted supporter of Fulton City, no hero shone brighter than Harry Lane.

Harry wasn't just a footballer. He was pure magic. The way he danced past defenders and sent the ball curling into the corner of the net. Harry tried to imitate every move, every feint, every goal in the back garden. On his bedroom wall, Harry's poster was the last thing Jack saw at night and the first when he woke in the morning.

One summer afternoon, Jack was bouncing his ball down the street, on his way to a kickabout in the park, when he heard the news on the radio through the open door of the corner shop: "News just in - Harry Lane has signed for Fulton Rovers."

Rovers? The Reds, the club his uncle called "scummers" with a half-serious scowl? Jack's ball slipped from his hands, rolling into the gutter. He thought he must have misunderstood - Harry would never wear red.

But it was true, that evening the local news was full of it, footage of Harry grinning awkwardly, holding a red jersey, cameras flashing all around. Jack stared at the screen, waiting for his hero to look into the lens and wink, as if to say, "Don't worry, mate, it's all a big joke." But Harry only spoke about "new challenges" and "exciting opportunities."

Tears pricked Jack's eyes. His dad tried, clumsily, to comfort him. "It's just football, son. Players move on." But Jack shook his head. How could it be *just* football?

For days, Jack refused to play. Back at school, arguments erupted - some kids jeered, waving red scarves, others muttered bitterly about loyalty and greed. Jack stayed quiet, carrying the hurt in his chest like a hidden bruise.

The first local derby of the season came: City versus Rovers, at home. Jack watched from the stands, his dad by his side, the City crowd's tension thick as fog. When Harry appeared in his new red kit City fans erupted in boos and jeers. Jack was silent - he didn't want to boo Harry but he couldn't clap either.

Late in the match, with the score level, Harry broke free, just as Jack had seen him do a hundred times in blue. He sprinted down the wing and slammed the ball into the net, the goalie had no chance. The red end exploded with joy; the blue side fell silent. Jack's heart sunk, but he couldn't help admiring the goal's beauty - the same magic, now for the enemy.

Walking home, Jack listened as his dad talked about players from the past who had crossed divides, how football was about more than colours. It was about passion, skill, the game itself. Jack nodded, staring at his scuffed trainers.

That night, Jack stood in front of his Harry poster. He didn't take it down. Instead, he whispered, "Thank you, Harry. Good luck... just not against us."