

Outcasts United

By Warren St. John

ON A COOL SPRING AFTERNOON at a soccer field in northern Georgia, two teams of teenage boys were going through their pregame warm-ups when the heavens began to shake. The field had been quiet save the sounds of soccer balls thumping against forefeet and the rustling of the balls against the nylon nets that hung from the goals. But as the rumble grew louder, all motion stopped as boys from both teams looked quizzically skyward. Soon a cluster of darts appeared in the gap of sky between the pine trees on the horizon and the cottony clumps of cloud vapor overhead. It was a precision flying squadron of fighter jets, performing at an air show miles away in Atlanta. The aircraft banked in close formation in the direction of the field and came closer, so that the boys could now make out the markings on the wings and the white helmets of the pilots in the cockpits. Then with an earthshaking roar deep enough to rattle the change in your pocket, the jets split in different directions like an exploding firework, their contrails carving the sky into giant wedges.

On the field below, the two groups of boys watched the spectacle with craned necks, and from different perspectives. The players of the home team—a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys from the nearby Atlanta suburbs playing with the North Atlanta Soccer Association—gestured to the sky and wore expressions of awe.

The boys at the other end of the field were members of an all-refugee soccer team called the Fugees. Many had actually seen the machinery of war in action,

and all had felt its awful consequences firsthand. There were Sudanese players on the team whose villages had been bombed by old Russian-made Antonov bombers flown by the Sudanese Air Force, and Liberians who'd lived through barrages of mortar fire that pierced the roofs of their neighbors' homes, taking out whole families. As the jets flew by the field, several members of the Fugees flinched.

"YOU GUYS NEED to wake up!" a voice interrupted as the jets streaked into the distance. "Concentrate!"

The voice belonged to Luma Mufleh, the thirty-one-year-old founder and volunteer coach of the Fugees. Her players resumed their practice shots, but they now seemed distracted. Their shots flew hopelessly over the goal.

"If you shoot like that, you're going to lose," Coach Luma said.

She was speaking to a young Liberian forward named Christian Jackson. Most of the Fugees had experienced suffering of some kind or another, but Christian's was rawer than most. A month before, he had lost three siblings and a young cousin in a fire at his family's apartment in Clarkston, east of Atlanta. Christian escaped by jumping through an open window. The smallest of the dead children was found under a charred mattress, an odd detail to investigators. But the Reverend William B. J. K. Harris, a Liberian minister in Atlanta who reached out to the family after the fire, explained that during Liberia's fourteen years of civil war, children were taught to take cover under their beds during the fighting, as a precaution against bullets and mortar shrapnel. For the typical American child, "under the bed" was the realm of ghosts and monsters. For a child from a war zone, it was supposed to be the safest place of all.

Not long before the fire, Luma had kicked Christian Jackson off the Fugees for swearing at practice. Swearing was against her rules. She had warned him once, and then when he swore again, she told him to leave and not to come back. That was how Luma ran her team. Not long after the fire, Christian showed up at the Clarkston Community Center field where the Fugees practiced, and watched quietly from behind a chain-link fence around the playing area. Under normal circumstances, Luma might have ignored him—she gave second chances, but rarely third. But Luma summoned Christian over and told him he could rejoin the team so long as he understood that he was on probation. If he swore again at practice or during a game, he was gone for good. No exceptions. Christian said he understood. This was his first game back.

Luma shouted to her players to gather around her and gave them their position assignments—Christian was told to play striker, on offense—and they took the field. Forty or so parents had gathered on the home team’s sideline to cheer on their boys, and they clapped as their sons walked onto the pitch. There was no one on the Fugees’ sideline. Most of the players came from single-parent families, and their mothers or fathers—usually mothers—stayed home on weekends to look after their other children, or else worked, because weekend shifts paid more. Few had cars to allow them to travel to soccer games anyway. Even at their home games, the Fugees rarely had anyone to cheer them on.

The referee summoned the Fugees to the line to go over their roster and to check their cleats and numbers. Luma handed him the roster, and the referee wrinkled his brow.

“If I mispronounce your name, I apologize,” he said. He ticked through the names awkwardly but respectfully. When he got hung up on a syllable, the boys would politely announce their own names, then step forward to declare their jersey numbers.

A few minutes later, a whistle sounded and the game began.

The head coach of the North Atlanta team was a screamer. From the outset, he ran back and forth on his sideline, barking commands to his players in a hoarse bellow: “Man on! Man on!” “Drop it! Drop it!” “Turn! Turn! Turn!” His words echoed over the quiet field like a voice from a public address system. Luma paced silently on her side of the field and occasionally glanced over at the opposite sideline with a perturbed look on her face. She was all for instruction, but her method was to teach during practice and during the breaks. Once the whistle blew, she allowed her players to be themselves: to screw up, to take chances, and to create. All the shouting was wearing on her nerves.

When North Atlanta scored first, on a free kick, the team’s coach jumped up and down on the sidelines, while across the field parents leaped from their folding lawn chairs in celebration: more grating noise. Luma pursed her lips in a tiny sign of disgust and kept pacing, quietly. She made a substitution on defense but otherwise remained silent. A few moments later, Christian Jackson shook himself free on the right side, dribbled downfield, and fired a line drive into the top right corner of the net: goal. Luma betrayed no reaction other than to adjust her tattered white Smith College baseball cap and to continue pacing. The Fugees soon regained possession; they controlled the ball with crisp passes and moved into range of the goal. A Fugees forward struggled free of traffic to take a shot

that flew a good twenty feet over the crossbar and into the parking lot behind the field, and soon after, let loose another that was wide by a similar margin. Luma paced. Meanwhile, with each of his team's shots the North Atlanta coach shouted more instructions to his players, ever more adamantly. He was getting frustrated. If his players had followed his instructions to the word, they could've scored on Manchester United. But as it was, they ended the first half trailing the Fugees 3–1.

A 3–1 lead at halftime would have pleased most soccer coaches. But Luma was seething. Her head down, she marched angrily to a corner of the field, the Fugees following behind sullenly. They could tell she was unhappy. They braced themselves for what they knew was coming. Luma ordered them to sit down.

“Our team has taken nine shots and made three—they've taken two shots and made one,” she told them, her voice sharp and strident. “You're outrunning them, outhustling them, outplaying them—why are you only winning three to one?”

“Christian,” she said, looking at the boy who sat on the grass with his arms around his knees, his eyes downcast. “This is one of your worst games. I want it to be one of your best games. I want to sit back and watch good soccer—do you understand?”

At that moment, the voice of the North Atlanta coach—still screaming at his players—drifted down the field to the Fugees' huddle. Luma pulled up and turned her narrowed gaze toward the source of the offending noise.

“See that coach?” Luma said, tilting her head in the direction of the screamer. “I want him to sit down and be quiet. That's when you know we've won—when he sits down and shuts up. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach,” her players replied.

When the Fugees took the field for the second half, they were transformed. They quickly scored three goals—an elegant cross, chested in with highlight-reel grace by a Sudanese forward named Attak, followed by a cannon shot from Christian from ten yards out. Moments later Christian dribbled into the box and faked to his left, a move that left the North Atlanta goalie tangled in his own limbs, before shooting right: another score. The opposing coach was still yelling—“Man on! Man on!”—so the Fugees kept shooting. Another goal. And another. When the frustrated North Atlanta players started hacking away at their shins and ankles, the Fugees brushed them off and scored yet again. At 8–2, the North Atlanta coach, hoarse now nearly to muteness, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, quietly wandered over to his bench, and sat down, flaccid and defeated. The Fugees tried to stifle their smiles. If Luma felt any sense of satisfaction, it was difficult to discern. She remained perfectly stone-faced. The referee blew his whistle three times to signal the end of the game. The final score was 9–2 Fugees. Christian Jackson had scored five goals.

The teams shook hands and the Fugees quickly ran to the bench for water and oranges, which awaited them in two white plastic grocery bags. A few moments later, the referee approached. He looked to be in his late fifties, white, with a graying mustache. He asked Luma if he could address her players. Luma hesitated. She was uncomfortable handing over her team’s attention to anyone, especially a stranger. A little warily, she summoned her team, who gathered in front of the referee some ten yards from their bench.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I’d like to thank you. You played the ball the entire game, and you didn’t take any cheap shots. They got frustrated and started hacking, and you didn’t retaliate. So I’d like to commend you on your sportsmanship.” The referee paused for a moment and swallowed hard.

“And that was one of the most beautiful games of soccer I’ve ever seen,” he said.