

A portrait of Millie Farrow, a professional soccer player, with her hair in a ponytail, wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. She is holding a white and black soccer ball in the bottom left corner. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a warm, golden light, possibly a sunset or sunrise.

**BRAVE  
ENOUGH**  
NOT TO QUIT

How I Realised My Football Dream

**MILLIE  
FARROW**

With Katie Field

# **BRAVE ENOUGH**

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## Chapter One

# The Love for Football Begins

I WAS a very hectic child, always had a lot of energy and showed a lot of interest in any kind of physical activity. My mum Nikki has a few stories to tell about my childhood which give an insight into the kind of person I am. Over to you, Mum ...

‘From a very early age it was quite apparent that Millie wasn’t going to be a girlie type of girl; she was very certain about the way she wanted to dress which didn’t include dresses or anything pink or stereotypically female. There were many occasions when she had been to play round our neighbour’s house with her sons and came home dressed in their clothes.

‘Millie liked rough and tumble, muck, mud and anything which was extreme in danger, which resulted in many visits to the hospital with fractured collarbones and even a broken ankle. There were many heart-stopping moments when I would look out of the window to see her flying off the 6ft

garden wall, landing on the trampoline with a somersault to the ground or climbing up trees, or balancing on the top of climbing frames. So, it wasn't really surprising when I enrolled her into ballet classes that she would sit at the front of the class in her pretty pink tutu with a face like thunder refusing to join in!

'Millie was always playing the fool and wanted to be the centre of attention – she could always bring a smile to anyone's face and still does. There were many occasions when I found myself waiting in the ladies' toilets for Millie, while she sat on the toilet singing at the top of her voice. I would stand outside with an embarrassed look on my face, telling her to hurry up. It did make people smile though!

'Being an escape artist was another talent of Millie's; when her brother Ollie went for a taster day at his new school which was across the road from where we lived, we came home with some of the other parents while we waited. After a while we noticed Millie was no longer in the garden with the other children. Panic started to rise as she could be found nowhere. We checked the street outside and just as I thought I needed to phone the police, a receptionist from the school came to my house and said, "We've found your daughter with an apple playing in the playground on one of the tricycles with her brother."

'She had decided she didn't want to miss out, so let herself out of the house and climbed over the school fence into the playground; hence, soon afterwards, a bolt was installed at

the top of our front door. Alas, this was not going to stop her as a few weeks later my neighbour's mum found her round the back of our house trying to climb back over the fence. She definitely kept us on our toes.

'It was when my sister's son started playing football for a local team and invited Millie along to the training sessions, we realised that actually this was the direction in which she wanted to go. Millie would come home covered in mud absolutely buzzing with joy and, from reports from the coaches, she showed great talent.'

My dad Keith also has some memories from my childhood to share.

'Right from the start it was clear that Millie was going to be a live-wire. She was born at breakneck speed and spent the next few months not sleeping much and keeping us awake. At the time we were living in a two-bedroom house, and with our son Ollie in the second bedroom there was no hiding place.

'As she grew, she showed a great interest in games and sport, and had no interest in any matters girly! She loved ball games in particular, football, cricket and tennis amongst her favourites. She was the classic tomboy, and also established herself as the family comedian, a position held to this day.

'I remember one Christmas when her grandma bought her (in error) a make-up bust so she could learn some beauty skills. Upon opening it she looked disgusted and hurled it across the room in anger. Luckily everyone saw the funny

side, and to Millie's delight her birthday present from my parents was a musical skeleton. This went down really well and over time a collection of them was amassed.

'She was also quite artful and once when her brother had lost a tooth, the following morning he was happy to find a 20p coin under his pillow. This was strange, as the tooth fairy had actually left a £1 coin there, which had been strangely substituted by you know who during the night!

'Millie genuinely seemed to enjoy her school years and always got involved in a wide variety of activities as well as sports. She started learning to play the violin, much to the delight of my dad who had played to a good level during his formative years. It is said that it takes ten years to play a good note on a fiddle – we never got to hear one, however, and, perhaps fortunately, Millie's career only spanned a year or so before it ebbed away along with the neighbourhood cats!

'My mum is a long-standing member of a choir which for a number of years during the noughties put on a Christmas panto/performance in a local community centre. This offered singing/dancing/acting parts for children aged five and over, and consequently all of our children took their place on the stage when the time came. Millie enjoyed these performances although suffered the wrath of the lady director for talking/messing about during the rehearsals. She showed no signs of stage fright and had a great time.'

I always had a love for football and my journey in the game started at nine years old, when I was given the

opportunity to go and train with the boys' team my cousin was in. As you may know, many female footballers of this generation began playing football with boys, or for a boys' team. Of course, back then there weren't many girls' teams to join, so playing with boys was how many females that now play professionally today started their career.

Not long after I started training with AFC Portchester (my cousin's team), my auntie saw an advert in the local *Sports Mail* for a girls' team called Cosham Blues that was starting up, and they were looking for players. Of course, she told my mum about it and not long afterwards, I was on my way to training.

My dad took me to the session, which took place in a big field in Portsmouth. I was so excited; all that mattered to me was doing well in the session and enjoying myself. The pitches were and still are terrible, but back then I didn't know any different and I didn't really care. All I cared about was being able to play football. Little did anyone know that a young innocent girl was about to start the most incredible journey of her life.

At that first Friday evening training session, I just went out and played. I played my heart out. The training session started, and it was a very strange place for me to be at such a young age – still only nine. My memory isn't as good as my dad's on how the evening went but he told me that the majority of the parents couldn't believe their eyes – they couldn't believe a little girl could play like this. One of them



even said, 'She has been sent from heaven', while another one compared me to George Best! They thought I was some brilliant player that had come out of nowhere, but the reality of the situation was that they had just never seen a little girl play football with any ability.

The session came to an end and the manager immediately presented me with the playing kit and confirmed that she could get me registered in time for the game on Sunday, just two days away. Me and Dad got back into the car and as soon as I shut the door I burst into tears because I was so happy, I couldn't believe it. It was an incredible feeling. I was only nine and that's what it meant. Everything. That feeling for football is one that has stayed with me throughout my career so far. The shirt number I got given was four and for many years after that it was my favourite number.

Despite being a girls' team, we were entered in a boys' league, which was obviously very tough and we lost nearly every game. But this was the start for me, the hunger to get to the next level, to score more goals than the game before.

Football wasn't the only sport I was good at as a child. My dad remembers me winning a lot of athletics races. 'At secondary school she managed to break the record for the 800m in years seven, eight, nine and ten,' he says. 'As there was no year 11 sports day there was not the opportunity to complete the clean sweep, although she did help with the organisation of the event for the younger students. This day was to reveal a different quality in Millie's personality that

was recognised and commented upon by her then PE teacher Miss Chaplin. The 800m race for year ten had started and it was evident that one runner was capable of beating Millie's record. Some in her position would be hoping that she would fall short, but not Millie who ran around actively encouraging her to succeed, which she duly did.

'Because of her success in football Millie became one of those sporting heroes amongst her peers; every school year across the country has at least one and we all remember their names in respect of our own years. She would beat almost everyone at almost anything, often qualifying for the next level, the inter-school competition.

'At around age 14 she wiped the floor with her year group at cross country, and as a result qualified for the Hampshire schools' qualifiers. Everyone at school was telling her that she was unbeatable and would triumph at what was an elite level. The reality was somewhat different however, as at this level there were kids concentrating on distance running and gaining momentum in their specialised field. The field set off with Millie at the front before disappearing into woodland on a circuit course. We all waited in anticipation by the finish line for the returning runners. Millie was not amongst the leaders and finished well down the field to massive personal disappointment.

'This day revealed a hint of future problems for Millie. She had struggled to breathe properly during the race and in time we came to realise that this was caused by anxiety.

After the race we assured her that the result didn't matter, and I think she accepted this.'

That breathing problem my dad talked about had already happened in some of my football matches, but it took a few years for us to realise I was actually having panic attacks. As my love for football had begun to get stronger, so had the emotions that I experienced. With my desire to succeed growing, this started to influence me mentally. When I was as young as ten, I had my first panic attack, or as I used to call it, 'the breathing thing' – that is what I named it when I tried to explain what was happening to my parents. The first time it happened was during a game. I can't remember exactly what caused it, but I can remember how horrible it was to try and deal with when I had absolutely no idea what was going on. My throat felt like it had closed up and I couldn't breathe properly. As a kid, this was scary and the start of the unknown.

I would get myself very worked up before and during games and end up in tears. It got to a point where my mum took me to see a doctor as we did not understand why it kept happening and I got prescribed an inhaler. Obviously back then I really had no idea why it kept happening and I was unable to explain it to a doctor, which must have led them to believe that an inhaler was the solution. They obviously thought it was a physical illness when the truth is, this was the start of my anxiety problem, and the inhaler wasn't going to do anything to help.

This wasn't something that was going away: it started to happen quite regularly in matches or during any kind of 'important' occasion in sport. Maybe this was the beginning of me putting pressure on myself, the start of trying to be a perfectionist. I always wanted to do well in everything I did, but when it came to football, it was and is another level. I had ridiculously high expectations of myself from as young as ten and I had no idea what was happening to me.

I wasn't aware of what was to come.

It never sat well with me when things didn't go right, even when I was as young as that. During a game of football, I would let my mistakes get to me. This would lead to anger and all sorts of emotions and as a result I would get 'the breathing thing'. As I got more familiar with 'the breathing thing', I didn't let it stop me from playing. I just knew I needed to calm myself down a little bit and then carry on with the game. I used to fight the feeling. As I got older the issue obviously developed into more than just 'the breathing thing' and then it mattered a lot more, as it would hinder me at important times, but I will go into that later.

Cosham Blues wasn't the only team I was involved with growing up. I found myself playing for Portsmouth Ladies, AFC Portsmouth and I eventually got asked to go and play for Hampshire Centre of Excellence. I was with Hampshire for about five seasons from the age of 12. This was when even greater opportunities started to come, such as England Talent Camps and so on.

Fast forward, and I eventually signed for Chelsea in 2011, for the 2011/12 season with the U16s. We trained two evenings a week at the men's training facility, Cobham Training Ground, which was amazing. Being 15 years old, and the sporting maniacs that we were as kids, meant that this was not the only commitment that I and the other girls in that squad had. Many of us would also be playing for other teams such as our county or school teams.

It was nearly the end of the season and I had made it to the FA Youth Cup Final with Chelsea. The team was great. Many from this team have made it to being professionals – including Rosella Ayane and Jodie Brett (later forced into retirement through injury), although some have not.

Because I was involved with more than one team, I had played in a cup final for a different team just two days before the FA Youth Cup Final. That game had gone to extra time and penalties, so I played 120 minutes of football just over 48 hours before going into this huge game against Arsenal at the MK Dons stadium. As a kid you don't think about things like that being a problem; we played some sort of sport every day whether it was at school, at after-school clubs, or representing other clubs in other competitions.

I remember my body feeling sore before that FA Youth Cup Final, and I remember doing recovery things like using a foam roller to help my muscles recover, and getting a massage from my mum, to help my body feel ready for

the Sunday. The anxiety crept up on me as the game got closer.

It was so cool being able to say my next game at the weekend was going to be the FA Cup Final. It was made that much of a big deal at school that my PE teachers at Cams Hill School arranged a minibus full of my friends to come and support my team that day. There was blue face paint and all sorts going on; it was amazing having the support I did from my friends.

It was a beautiful day and as we travelled up to Milton Keynes to meet the rest of the team, I can remember singing my heart out in the car, while every now and then getting that heart-dropping nervous feeling about the game. I don't know how my parents put up with the constant singing and screaming that happened on a regular basis to and from training and games; maybe they secretly enjoyed the racket: the joy, love and excitement they could see in my face when I was on the way to football.

The day couldn't have been any more perfect; the vibe with the girls was buzzing as always. Everyone was so excited to play, the coaches were in such good spirits. What a day this could be to remember – but unfortunately for me, although it started as a day full of nothing but joy, it soon took a turn for the worse.

In the second half I went to intercept a pass (there was no one around me) and the leg that I landed on hyperextended. I felt a kind of crack or pop in my knee and I'm sure I heard

it too. I instantly went down to the ground and screamed the whole stadium down. Picture a practically empty stadium which usually holds 30,000 people, echoing with my distress. The entire place fell silent. After screaming and crying on the floor, adrenaline must have kicked in as I attempted to get up. The small crowd started clapping but as soon as I put my foot down it just felt as though my knee would just collapse. The pain was horrible. Obviously, something I had never felt before. I was scared, I was worried, what could it have been?

I got taken into the changing rooms where my physio did some tests, I had no idea what was going on to be honest, I was so young and clueless. All I cared about was watching my team. All I wanted was for us to win. I was due to go to the hospital, but I refused to go until after the game because I needed to watch my team.

The game eventually went to penalties and we won! The Arsenal team we played against had many talented footballers that made it as pros, including England's Euros-winning captain Leah Williamson, Jade Bailey, Molly Bartrip and Carla Humphreys.

Now began the process of finding out what I had done to my knee. I was 15, we didn't have any special medical backing through Chelsea at that age, so first of all I went to the hospital after the game, and I was told I had damaged my medial collateral ligament. I was given some crutches to use for a while and I then had a doctor's appointment

and their conclusion was that I would be back playing in three weeks.

We weren't sure that this was correct, and the NHS waiting lists for further appointments were long, so we decided to go private. My family paid for me to get an MRI scan which showed that I had torn my anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). I remember sitting in the room and being told that news and feeling numb. I didn't really know what to think of it, I was so young. I tried not to cry, but I'm not sure I understood at that age what this meant. I had no idea what to expect.

I could sense that my dad was almost angered by the result when we got back in the car.

Looking back on it now, my dad says: 'I remember thinking that this could be the end of her career, as this type of injury had curtailed or restricted the careers of many male professional players over the years. Fortunately, this was not the case although it would be the best part of a year before she was able to play again.'

The cost of having private surgery on an ACL tear would be high, depending on the surgeon. I had a friend, Atlanta Primus, and her dad Linvoy Primus was an ex-pro footballer for Portsmouth, and he managed to help us get in contact with the surgeon who had sorted his injuries. This saved my parents about £7,000. Niall Flynn, the surgeon, spoke to us on the phone and managed to squeeze me in for a spot only two weeks after the conversation with him.



ACL ruptures must be one of the most feared injuries to have in any sport, not just football. The general process of returning to play takes about nine months. This can of course be quicker (with more risk) or slower if there are any complications or problems, it all depends on the rehabilitation. I was 16 when I had my first ACL reconstruction. This was the first time I remember seeing some sort of perspective in life. I think stepping into the unknown at any point can be scary for people but when you are so emotionally invested in something it can go one way or the other when you hit a crisis point, and luckily for me I was able to start to understand there's more to life than football. This kind of issue is something I still get caught up in and forget when things aren't going so well. Dealing with this injury was a huge turning point for me. I had so many thoughts and emotions and this moment transformed that for me in an instant.

After I had my surgery, I was unable to walk without crutches at first, but during that time the Olympic torch was going through Portsmouth so there was a huge event going on. There was live music, food, drinks all going on, on Southsea Common, which is right next to the beach. We decided to go for a family day out, but I was to go in a wheelchair to make it more comfortable for me. I was happy to be able to go and get out of the house and enjoy the experience because it hadn't been easy since the operation.

However, the joyous family day that I had hoped for soon turned out to be different. I can remember feeling so

emotional and feeling like people were staring at me because I was in a wheelchair; I felt paranoid and angry.

When we got to the Common, there were thousands of people dancing and drinking and listening to the music. I was being wheeled along and I looked up and found myself catching the eye of a girl who was also in a wheelchair. My whole world stopped for a second – it was like everything around me had paused and my focus and attention turned to this girl who was looking at me as if to say, ‘I know how you feel and it’s okay.’ It was like some sort of weird connection or understanding that I could feel without even speaking to her. Because we were both in wheelchairs, there was almost a look of relief in her face to see that someone else was in the same position as her. Little did she know that this was just a quick fix for me to get out of the house following surgery, but I felt a moment between us, and it really got to me. That was her life, and I felt as though she was happy to have seen someone who felt like she did, just for one moment. We just smiled at each other for just a few seconds, but it felt like time had just stopped. I could feel myself feeling sorry for her, feeling grateful for my life and it shook me for the rest of the day.

My family found a space in the middle of the crowd so we could enjoy the music, but I couldn’t see a thing. I was so restricted, and I wasn’t used to that. A man standing near us could see that I was stressed, and he leant down and pointed over to the disabled section where you could go up on your

wheelchair so you could see the stage. My heart dropped when he suggested that option to us and I found it hard to hold in the tears. I just wanted to go home.

This day put so much into perspective for me, as I had only just turned 16 years old. I was going through a very challenging time in my life at a young age, having knee surgery and missing out on everything I knew. I was in a wheelchair for one day and the emotional roller coaster I experienced during it just made me realise a lot. This was only going to last a short amount of time for me, soon I would be walking and running again and eventually playing football, but the girl I saw that day could well still be in a wheelchair and that is her life. I felt lucky and it made me appreciate everything I had.

Through all those weeks and months, my parents were worrying about the negative effects the injury could have on me.

My dad says: 'The timing of all of this was also unfortunate since Millie was due to sit her GCSE exams over the coming weeks. She actually did really well in achieving a good set of results, enabling her to go on to commence her A-level studies at Itchen College. But it was sad to see Millie having to endure all of this misfortune. She had lived for sport for years and was now prevented from doing pretty much anything. She was starting college that September with her main subject being PE, and of course for the initial year this was badly impeded.'