

M I C H A E L   H E I N I C K E



An uplifting story of one Burnley fan's  
personal battle amid Premier League promotion

M I C H A E L   H E I N I C K E

FOOTBALL  
CANCER  
LIFE OR DEATH

An uplifting story of one Burnley fan's  
personal battle amid promotion



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*Part One*

**TODAY**

## **Saturday 21 February 2015**

Today's the day then. Today's the day we finally get a win.

The North Down & Ards Small Sided Games Programme for the 2007 age group started back in September of last year and the team I coach, Ards FC Academy, are still yet to win a game. There's been 15 rounds of fixtures; 15 defeats in a row. Well, more than that actually. I even entered a second team after Christmas to double my chances, but it still hasn't happened for us. Instead of losing once a week, I'm losing twice a week. Not that it's about winning at this age – obviously. These boys are only seven and eight. Winning is a dirty word, except when you can't get a win. Then you need one. That's when it becomes about winning.

My first stop this morning is the new 3G pitch at Spafield for a 9am kick-off against Holywood. The section at Spafield is 2007/08 kids so the standard isn't as good. But we still haven't been able to buy a win up there. At least we've scored a couple though and we're not quite getting hammered by as many. All depends where you're starting from, doesn't it? I have come to learn that there is such a thing as a good hammering – I'd rather get beat by 5-1 than 15-0.

15-0 is no exaggeration. One of the early games in the 2007 section in Bangor, we were playing Ards Rangers in a local derby (they're all local but this one especially) and we got absolutely battered. It was horrible.

We received our first parent complaint that week. That was nice of them. Apparently, me and my coach, Phil, 'did nothing', we just 'watched and let it happen'. It's five-a-side

and seven-year-olds, what are they expecting? Do they think that we can do something, like, tactically? Tinker with it? Christ on a bike, I can't talk tactics with kids who can't even tie a bootlace.

There's two reasons why we got hammered. Firstly, the kids we played against were stronger physically – my lot are on the young side and lack power and pace. But the bigger issue is that the other kids are better at football – they've better ball control, they can dribble, shoot, and some of them can even pass. We barely got a kick. How they want me and Phil to instantly address that minor issue on a Saturday morning when we're 8-0 down I've no idea, but it's not something easily fixed.

I can explain it a bit as well. Most of my group are quite new to football. A lot of them only joined this season. A few that had been down last year, well, they didn't really have anybody to coach them, they were just passed around a wee bit, so they're all lacking practice. Nobody owned them until now. But now they're mine and I'm accountable and responsible. It takes time. Other teams in the same age group have been up and running for a year or two. They're years ahead, which when you're only seven is a long time.

I'm patient with this. My own kids aren't involved with the club. I've no conflicts of interest. It's easy for me. It's all about development. I rotate the players, giving everybody a fair chance, regardless of ability. I want to develop them. All of them. So I'm fine with losing games if I've stuck to my principles. I make substitutions when I know that by doing so I'm potentially throwing the game.

And we do lose. Every single game.

Keep going though, we can turn this corner, climb this mountain. We're getting better and that's what matters. Not winning, that doesn't matter. But winning is a barometer

for measuring that we've got better. I want to measure up. I want to win. Just once, one win. Monkey off the back. Put it to bed. And then we can kick on.

Today. It has to be the day. Let's win, boys.

I pull up at Spafield on my own and make my way down to the pitch. Even before we kick off I've a good feeling here – our opponents look similar to us physically – for once. Still, we start as slow as ever and go a goal down. There's no panic though. I don't care. I'm used to it. The kids are used to it. It take a few minutes but we get back into the game, and I start to feel like the next goal won't be one we're conceding. And it isn't. We equalise. It's the first time all season we've been drawing in a game at a scoreline other than 0-0. My heart's going.

I shouldn't get too excited – we go 2-1 down. Shit. But we get on top again and score. 2-2. We're on top here and it's a bit weird. Do we even dare to win the game? I start to think of this going wrong – we'll end up getting beat again despite being the better team.

I shouldn't worry though. A piledriver from our long-haired midfielder puts us 3-2 up. We're in the lead for the first time in the game. And, the season! Heads are dropping. This time they're not the heads in the red shirts of Ards FC Academy. We don't look back. 3-2 turns to 4-2, 5-2 and it finishes up 6-2.

And now breathe.

I bring the boys in and there's an air of disbelief. Plenty of smiles though and high fiving going on.

Now time to run the gauntlet. This is the walk off the pitch past the waiting parents who are normally all thinking 'that was shit'. It's no gauntlet today though. I swagger off the pitch like I've just tactically masterminded a victory in the final of the Champions League.

I get a few comments from the parents. ‘Well done’, ‘great result Michael’, that type of thing. I play it down big time like I knew it would happen. ‘Yeah I think that’s been coming for a few weeks now, they’ve been threatening that.’

I get a few ‘aye, you’re right’, ‘spot on’.

I’m not convinced, but agree with me if you want to.

My other team are playing at Bangor in just under an hour so I get in my car and head home. It starts to rain as I drive back listening to the Courteeners’ *St Jude*. I’ve been playing this non-stop for the last month or so. It’s a 2008 album – I’ve no idea how it took me seven years to become addicted to it but that sometimes happens. By the time I get back to Bangor, it’s throwing it down. Good. I’m from Burnley. I like it better in the rain.

I nip home for a couple of minutes, partly to take a leak, but mainly to have a long-awaited conversation.

‘How did they get on?’ my wife asks me, shouting from another room.

I answer ‘won ... 6-2.’

‘What, they won? Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘6-2?’

‘Yes.’

I get to the leisure centre in Bangor and it’s now proper pissing it down. It’s another AstroTurf pitch – I can’t quite describe the surface. It’s better than the old hockey surface astros from the 1980s but not as good as the thicker pile 3G pitches. Anyway, despite the heavy rain the pitch is completely fine so there is no need to postpone it. The bigger issue is my wee players; before we start a few of them look like they’re freezing. Personally, I think this is great weather for football. Nice slick surface, ripe for slide tackles. Nobody does them anymore. To be fair these astro pitches don’t help.



I'm down there early so there's time for the parents to ask me the question about how the other team got on earlier. Normally I dread this question. But not this week. They are surprised to say the least. It ripples around and one tells another, and then the kids learn of the victory. A dad tells his son that it puts added pressure on his team to do the same. Can you imagine? Two wins in one morning? Well yes, I can imagine. You're in the stars today and you owe me big time.

We're playing Abbey Villa for the second time this season. I know that last time they beat us (that's easy to remember) but I can't recall the magnitude of the defeat. The sky might be grey and the rain relentless, as to be expected in February in Northern Ireland. But our start is bright and unexpected. Very quickly, we race into a 3-0 lead. The weather seems to have neutralised the game and most of my players don't seem to have noticed. One of mine is in tears though and walks off the pitch. His dad comes through the gates and says he's taking him home – it's too cold. My coach, Phil, is watching through the fence at the other side, to be near to his car in which his son is sitting (too cold to watch). Abbey Villa pull one back but they're never in the game. We score again. They score. We score.

The rain doesn't give up. My rain jacket is soaking to my skin. My hair sticks flat on my head – the water pressure better than my electric shower at home. Phil gestures to me with a few minutes left – he's heading home.

I look lonely stood on the touchline. I'm feeling anything but. And the pissing rain that soaks me to the bone might as well be the finest champagne. We win 7-4. Two wins and it's not even midday. Its kids' football – it means nothing – but this today means everything. It's a barometer of how far the kids have come – but also, more so, of how far I've come in

the last year. It's nothing to do with football, but everything to do with it at the same time. I'm measuring okay. Thank fuck for the football.