

'NEVER GIVE UP!' - A HIGHGATE RED STAR STORY

The headline said it all: '**Highgate Crash Out Of Cup.**'

He didn't want to read anymore but he couldn't stop his eyes scanning over the first few lines of the story that lay below that awful headline.

'After a poor run of games in the premier league, Highgate Red Star failed to find better form in the FA Cup and after struggling through the early rounds they finally crashed out against League Two Farnham United last night, beaten two - nil by a team made up of what were, until recently, only part-time players. The way Red Star played was as bleak and depressing as the fog that descended on White Fox Lane and shrouded this once famous and proud club in gloom..'

Ravimondo screwed-up the newspaper and threw it across the kitchen, nearly upsetting his steaming mug of coffee as he did so. Some of the hot liquid spilled onto the table top. He sat staring at it as it pooled under his plate and began to drip onto the floor.

He didn't move to mop it up. He was too depressed to even care that it was splattering his new trainers and ruining the bottom of his Levis.

He picked up another paper and flicked it over to the back page.

'**Red Star Last Night - Farnham's Delight;**' mocked the new headline.

This paper too, flew across the room.

He picked-up the last paper that lay beside his untouched breakfast. '**Highgate Red - or Highgate DEAD?**' Screamed the headline and another paper joined the pile on the floor.

He took an angry gulp of what was left in his mug and reached out to switch on his new DAB radio, which was permanently tuned to Radio 5.

They'd got Lawro into the breakfast studio. His voice was droning on in its flat northern tone.

'..well, Nicky it can only be seen as a disaster for Red Star. There's going to be a lot of questions asked about the way this season's going - after all they finished eighth in the league last year, only just missing out on European football and for a long time they looked like real contenders for a top four place and really there was a lot for their supporters to hope for this season.'

Nicky Campbell's voice cut in: 'But it all started going wrong towards the end of the season..'

'Or put it another way,' said Lawro, 'When they lost Marvin Cole..'

Ravimondo clicked the radio off. He didn't need to be told about losing Marvin. Marvin, a hugely successful manager who was liked and respected by every player who had ever been under him in his long and illustrious career; whose arrival at Highgate Red Star had heralded a rapid rise in the club's fortunes, almost taking it back to the glory days of the '60s.

Marvin, the manager that he and the other first team players had so admired and under whose careful eye and intelligent, professional advice they had grown from bottom of the league, relegation likely, no-hopers - to top of the league, serious contenders.

But where was he now? Gone! Fired by a ruthless chairman in terrible circumstances. A chairman who was besotted with the idea of a 'new football culture,' (whatever that was!), a 'new way of winning,' a 'new style,' that he saw personified in the odd figure of Georgi Grahmidov, Red Star's new manager.

It had been like this...

As Lawro had said, Red Star had been enjoying one of their greatest seasons of modern times and by the beginning of April last year they were well placed in the league.

It was true to say that Ravimondo had never known a time in the five years he had been at Red Star when their football was more fluent, when they had worked better as a team and when their attack had been so feared and their defending so admired.

Happily settled in his favourite right wing position but given the freedom by Marvin to be allowed to drift in behind their striker Alexei Keanley, or to link with him to form a striking pair, Ravimondo had scored eight goals already that season.

The whole team was contented and playing well within themselves and they were happy with the fluent, attacking style that Marvin had insisted they played, in the best traditions of the club.

Vijamo, their exciting, internationally acclaimed attacking mid-fielder and Ravimondo's elder brother, had gone from strength to strength that season. Under Marvin his footwork - which had always been dazzling, had grown from being brilliant to being exceptional, as had his ability to pick out a player in a long pass, with pin point accuracy.

He was recognised throughout the English game as the most talented dribbler of the ball and the toughest of opponents, being both an artist with the ball at his feet or a bulldozer of a defender against an opposition's attack - and that season Vijamo was generally acclaimed as perhaps the best player, not only in the country but throughout Europe.

Yes. Life in Red Star last year, had been exciting, enjoyable and exhilarating. Ryan Carlos, had probably never defended so well, Hari Buxtonera was an imposing figure in mid-field and Stefan Scorovich in goal, seemed to have developed magnetic hands the size of dustbin lids - it had to be a brilliant shot that got past him and into the back of the Red Star net!

Few teams could live with them. Even the great Chesterman United had only managed a goalless draw; their world famous young striker, Ray Mooney, squeezed out of the game by Vijamo's constant harassment. Kopend United had been swept aside three nil and Geordie Town simply wilted under a Ravimondo hat trick, a feat repeated by his brother against Real Hampstead a few weeks later.

Yes, it was a great year last year and then suddenly the hammer blow fell.

Marvin Cole had collapsed on the touch line just before half time in a home game against Charlston Athletico.

He'd had a minor heart attack; not life threatening but enough to mean he was out of football and the stress of management for a few months to come.

Sitting in his kitchen, Ravimondo remembered standing with his brother outside of the players' entrance after that fateful game, watching the ambulance drive away, its blue lights flashing, a police car in front of it, carving a route through the crowds of spectators.

Vijamo had turned to him in the gathering dusk. 'Wonder what'll happen to us now?' he said.

Ravimondo shrugged. 'That's up to Mr Ideales.' He'd said. 'I expect he'll appoint a caretaker manager for a while.'

The boys went home, worried but unaware of the hammer-blow that was awaiting them.

Oswaldo Ideales was the Chairman of Highgate Red Star. An Argentinean businessman, he and his brothers - Setteo, Caucho and Sofano had bought the club only a few months ago and the players and the fans still didn't know much about them.

They soon did.

Within days they had fired Marvin. They said he was too ill to make a come back and that they had offered him a good compensation package and that he would always be special to the club - but whichever way you looked at it, they'd fired him! Next they announced that they had appointed a new manager and not just any manager but a world cup winning manager. A man who had actually held the precious trophy in his hands and raised it aloft. A man who had taken his country to the very pinnacle of international competition and come away a victor.

And yet there was nothing but shock among the press and football pundits at the appointment; and to be frank, nothing but horror among the players of Red Star.

Why, you may ask? After all, wouldn't any football club want to be managed by a world cup winner?

Yes..

Of course..

But the trouble was that Georgi Grahmidov was not a manager of a world cup winning *football* team but instead he had managed the Argentinian women's synchronised swimming team and he had taken them to victory in the championships for that sport in 2003.

The press were amazed. The fans were shocked and stunned. The players were horrified and the other clubs in the league sat back and rubbed their hands in glee, confident that the ascendancy of the Red Stars would soon be a thing of the past and that they would be slumping down the league in no time. And quite a few of the rival fans and managers inevitably had a good laugh at their expense. For many weeks afterwards rival fans would throw bikinis, speedos and water goggles onto the pitch whenever Red Star came on to play and sing the old Beatles song, 'In An octopus's Garden' at them.

The Red Star players and fans were mortified and sadly they were right to be depressed about things. Very soon the club began slipping down the league. From second place, Red Star rapidly dropped to eighth position and by the final game of the season they had missed out by two points on a European place.

Oswaldo Ideales was unrepentant; he merely told his players and the press the same thing, that Georgi Grahmidov was a master tactician, an expert on fitness and motivation, a brilliant strategist and organiser and that it didn't matter what sport he was in, those gifts would ensure success for any team he led. So what about the specialities of football? The techniques and coaching of specific football skills? They didn't matter, said Oswaldo. They had other people at the club, directors of football and the like, who could deal with that!

What Osvaldo didn't say, was that Georgi Grahmidov was his second cousin twice removed and that his father, Mario, had given Osvaldo his first chance in business and that Osvaldo felt he owed Georgi's family a favour. So he said, instead, that Georgi brought to the club ambition, drive, style and a winning formula.

Sitting in his kitchen a few months on, looking at the morning papers, Ravimondo didn't agree. The club was reclining in the bottom of the league and last night they'd been knocked out of the fourth round of the F.A. Cup - and it was only the first week of January.

'Something's got give.' He muttered darkly as he stood and picked-up his kit bag.

He strode outside and eased his slender frame into his bright red, vintage Jaguar E-Type convertible, with the V12 engine. He gunned the car into life and drove it down the long gravel drive and through the automatic gates, turning its long bonnet in the direction of the Red Star training ground.

'Yes.' He muttered again. 'Something's got to give... Before we end up-being relegated..!'

At the practice ground he had to face the usual barrage of questions from the group of reporters who always

gathered in the players' car park before every training session.

They always wanted to know the same thing. How was he coping with being on the subs bench? What did it feel like not starting every game, as he used to in the old days, the old days of Marvin Cole? But today there was a new question. Ace Reporter, Safia 'Hot Notes' Dale was there, from the Daily Mire. She pushed through the unruly mob and thrust the microphone of her tape recorder into Ravimondo's face. She wanted to know what it had felt like not to be even picked for the game last night, not even as a substitute? How was it, for the first time in his playing career at Red Star, not getting changed and running out with the team? Did it hurt? Was he angry about it? Was he going to seek a transfer? And was that why he was not even in the ground as a spectator? Had things got so bad that he couldn't even bear to be at the club?

Grim faced, Ravimondo stared down at the young reporter but he said nothing as he pushed his way past her and through the crowd, shielding his face from the flash of camera bulbs. The security guard let him through the gate in the wire mesh fence and he trudged disconsolately over the gravel to the small brick changing rooms where other squad members were already gathering for the morning's session.

'Hi, Ravi!' Called his brother who came trotting over to meet him.

'Hi, Vijamo,' Ravimondo replied miserably.

'You look terrible!' said Vijamo. 'Bad night?'

'Oh, no - perfect. Nothing I like better than being dropped from the team and spending my evening at home watching the TV and seeing my club being knocked out of the Cup.'

Vijamo did not respond to his brother's bad temper. He understood him too well and he could imagine the pain he felt at being dropped from the team. Instead he laid a hand on Ravimondo's shoulder.

Ravimondo looked up at him.

'Sorry Vijamo,' he said, softening his tone a little. 'It must have been worse for you. I only had to watch but you had to play in that.. that..'

Words failed him.

'That rabble?' Said Vijamo. 'Or would tragedy, farce, disgrace.. be better?'

'What went wrong?' Moaned Ravimondo.

'What went right, brother,' Said Vijamo. 'You were dropped but no one knows why. Our illustrious new manager decided to leave Dylan, Ryan, Euan and Alex on the bench - apparently to rest them for the next league game. And then he puts on Justin Nicko - who he has only just signed and who has never played for a premier league club before.'

'But why?' Asked Ravimondo.

'Apparently, he had a hunch that Justin might be the next Ray Mooney.'

'A hunch?!!'

'Yes. Seems Mr Grahmidov is famous for his hunches. That's how he picked the Argentinian synchronised swimming captain...'

'Really - wasn't she the one...?'

'The one who drowned, yes.'

Ravimondo moaned again and held his head in his hands.

'It's a nightmare, Vijamo. It's a nightmare!' he said.

'And the new training methods haven't been going too well either. He told Stefan Scorovitch that a goal keeper should be able to stop any ball with just one hand, so he made him walk around all last week with his left hand tied behind his back and then last night when they untied it, it was so stiff and ached so much that he couldn't move it at all and he really did have to stop everything with one hand.'

'Which he didn't.' said Ravimondo.

'Not the first four goals anyway. At least in the second half he could move it a bit - only three got past him then.'

'It's so embarrassing.. and it's so humiliating!'

'You should have been playing. I wanted to die or crawl off the pitch and hide.'

As they were talking the boys were walking towards the changing rooms. They stepped into the damp, murky brick built building that smelt of liniment and sweat and Ravimondo looked around.

'Someone not here.' He said.

Jacob de Roth looked across at him from the bench where he was tugging on his boots.

'If you mean Jim Sullivan, he phoned me last night. He's been put on the transfer list. Mr Grahmidov says he's not needed anymore.'

'But he's our first choice central defender,' gasped Vijamo. 'One of the best.'

'We're cutting back on defenders, apparently,' said Alfred from the other side of the dressing room. 'I heard Mr Grahmidov talking to the chairman. He reckons it will make us more of an attacking team.'

There was a collective groan from the rest of the players in the dressing room when they heard this.

'It's crazy, said Franklin Sydham. 'What next? Take away our goal keeper, I suppose, to make us keep the ball in their half.'

'Don't say that! Said Tom McRaeston. 'He'll hear you and try it out!'

They would have laughed but nobody seemed to find anything very funny at that moment.

'It gets worse,' said Vijamo. Next week we play Highbury and we've got to win that. We've just got to.'

The changing room went silent. The derby game with Highbury was always a needle affair and this one would be played at Home, at White Fox lane. Highbury were flying high this year. They were second to Chelski at the top of the table and streaking through the FA Cup - with the calm assurance that comes from a good team playing well, under a good manager.

There were quite a few in the Red Star dressing room today, who would gladly have swapped places with them.

'Not only that,' said Audsley King, 'but if we don't win that game, I can't see how we can ever get enough points to pull ourselves out of the relegation zone, let alone get a half decent finish to the season.'

A terrible and ominous silence settled on the squad. It was unthinkable but was it possible that Highgate Red Star could lose to Highbury and end up being relegated?

Ravimondo began to pull off his t-shirt and dug out his training shirt from his kit bag. He looked around at the miserable faces.

'We'll have to think of something boys.' He snapped at the rest of the squad. 'We'll have to think of something. We haven't got a choice. We've just got to turn things round - and quickly.'

Twenty minutes later the squad were out on the pitch under the watchful gaze of Ted Harrington, one of Red Star's deputy managers. At least Ted was one of the old school. He had the players running through the standard training patterns, jinking round cones, practising long balls, tackles and quick passes.

He was just setting-up a set piece that could be played off a free kick near the box, when the podgy figure of Georgi Grahmidov, wrapped-up in a scarlet track suit, a mauve scarf, bright blue padded gloves with a yellow beany on his head came looming through the damp mist.

'Eh, boys,' he squeaked, in his high pitched voice, with its heavy Argentine accent. 'Eh, boys. I come for to show you 'ow we ween next week in the what you call derby, game, Eh?'

He pronounced 'derby' as it was spelt. Ted Harrington looked up at heaven, all thoughts of his set piece evaporating like the steamy breath that puffed from the fat little manager's mouth.

'Ees no problem!' Georgi Grahmidov beamed at the players and seemed oblivious to the fact that they scowled back at him.

'Ess so simple,' He said, still smiling at them from under the yellow beany. 'We ween by the what you call seexth sense.'

The squad looked non-plussed.

'You know,' he said. 'You have the smell and the touchy feely and the tastie and the eye ball but you have another sense - the seexth sense.'

The players had stopped looking non-plussed, instead they looked amazed.

Georgi Grahmidov held up a bundle of what looked black pieces of velvet.

'Eet is like the swimming,' he said. 'Under the water the sweemers cannot see each other but they have a seexth sense they develop in training for knowing where each other ees.'

'He's going to chuck us in a swimming pool,' whispered Audsley King to Ryan Carlos.

'No,' said the podgy little manager. 'Cos we don't have a sweeming pool. So, I am a gonna blind-fold you and thena you play the football with each other and you will learn to pass to each other and to dreeble and to pass withouta

being able to see each other. Eet is how you develop the seexth sense. You see?'

The squad looked at him in disbelief, their eyes wide with amazement.

Sure enough, at his insistence, they were soon blindfolded. And then followed one of the of the most embarrassing, bizarre and terrible fifteen minutes of Vijamo's and Ravimondo's playing careers.

Thirty three professional footballers, veterans of the League, rugged men one and all, careered around the field, bumping into each other, falling over, chasing each others' voices and trying to kick a football, they couldn't even see, to one another.

Boots flew, passions erupted and bad tempers exploded as they tripped over each other, knocked each other down and ended-up sprawling in the mud, battered, bruised and humiliated.

And they would have been even more humiliated if they had known that hidden away in a small wood, on a hill over looking the training ground, a certain young female reporter was noting down every fall and spill in her notepad, while the cameraman beside her caught all the action through the very long lens on the end of his camera.

Eventually Georgi Grahmidov blew his whistle and they all slumped to the ground and stayed there, ripping off the hateful masks.

Oblivious to his players anger and the terrible thoughts they all harboured for him, Georgi Grahmidov beamed down at them.

'See,' he said. 'Ees brilliant, eh? You are developing your seexth sense like nobody's buseeness, eh?'

Thirty three pairs of eyes glowed with hatred back at his smiling face.

'And now,' he went on. 'We weell practise what I call the Argentinian football.'

Vijamo looked up at him.

'What's that?' he asked.

'Eees a very good way to play football. You passa the ball and then you run straight away...'

Thirty six pairs of eyes looked blank.

'What do you think we normally do?' asked Ravimondo, whose anger was rising within in him.

'I don't know,' Said the little man. 'Maybe you pass and stay still too much or you kick the ball long down the peetch. That ees the English way - but now you learn the Argentinean way.'

'I don't believe it,' Said Ravimondo, his anger finally welling over. He stood up and faced the little Argentinian.

'I just don't flipping believe it! We're professional footballers! PROFESSIONAL! Of course we pass and run - and no, we don't just hoof it down the pitch! What do you think we do? Kick the ball and stop for a cup of tea?'

But Georgi Grahmidov was made of thick skin. If he saw how angry Ravimondo was, he didn't show it at all. Or maybe he just didn't realise. Whichever way, he merely smiled an even broader smile than before and laid a kindly hand on the young player's shoulder.

'Ah,' he said. 'You see thees ees why you do not get picked for the first team no more. Because you do not know about the modern skeells of the game and you weell not learn. You get angry, my fine young friend, because you are afraid to learn and let's face eet, eegnorance, she is nota the bleess!'

And with those mysterious words Georgi Grahmidov turned on his heel and walked happily back through the mist towards his car.

Cold, depressed and miserable the thirty three man squad returned to the changing block an hour later.

They slumped onto their benches and sat motionless for a while, the steam of exertion rising off the backs of their muddy shirts.

'Blind man's bluff!' Snorted Alfred Jacob de Roth. 'We're professional football players and he's got us doing kids games!'

'I thought you'd lose your cool completely about the pass and run.' Euan Cunningston said to Ravimondo. 'I still don't understand why he's dropped you though!'

'I do,' Said Vijamo. 'It's because Ravi answers him back and tells him the truth.'

'I'm not proud of that.' Sighed Ravimondo. 'I mean the manager's the boss and all that - but, well, he really

rattles me sometimes. I mean 'Argentinean football!! I mean, well...'

Once again words failed him.

'Well, there's nothing we can do about it.' Said Stefan Scorovich. 'He's the boss and there's nothing we can do about it. I guess if Mr Ideales wants him as manager, we'll just have to accept that we're going to be relegated, and that's that!'

There was a gloomy silence.

Then Ravimondo stood up.

'No!' he said. 'No! We can't give up that easily. Think of the players before we came along, who made this club great; think of the fans, think of what we owe them. Think of the history of the Red Stars! No. We won't give up.'

'I don't see what we can do.' Said Audsley King. 'Unless you've got a brilliant idea that you haven't told us about.'

'Well,' said Ravimondo. 'You know, as matter of fact I think I do. Yes. I think I do!'

Eleven year old Will Cameron had spent the afternoon in the park with his rugby ball and his football, trying to decide which sport he preferred. He had just decided that it was football, when he kicked a long ball further than he meant to and it disappeared into the gathering gloom of the winter's afternoon and into the bushes a few yards in front of him.

It was getting late and he'd been in the park since school had ended and his Mother would kill him if he was late for dinner again, so he ran quickly to the hedgerow and dived into it.

The ball had gone further into the scrubby bushes than he had realised and he was virtually through them and on the other side before he spotted it, lying on a bed of fallen leaves. As he reached out for it another football, greasy with mud, landed with a thump just in front of him.

He looked up to see a tall man in a bright blue track suit and trainers jogging toward him.

'Pass it back then!' The man called.

Will straightened-up and quickly kicked the ball so that it travelled with a slight curve to land neatly at the man's feet. The man turned it with practised ease onto

his instep and whipped in a cross that must have been twenty yards, to the feet of another track suited figure.

'Thanks son.' Called the man as he jogged away. 'Nice pass!'

Will looked around and realised there were at least thirty track suited men in this little secluded area of the park and they were busy passing balls to one another, or dribbling between piles of track suit tops, arranged in elaborate patterns on the grass and not far away, two goal posts had been roughly made-up from a pile of kit bags and a figure was practising saves from a couple of other players, who were heading or striking shots at him.

As Will reluctantly dragged himself away for his dinner he couldn't help thinking that the man who had spoken to him looked very like the Red Star striker, Ravimondo, and he could have sworn that the Goalie was Stefan Scorovitch.

But that, he thought, was ridiculous. Highgate Red Star didn't train in the park!

As darkness finally fell and made it impossible to train any more, thirty three men packed-up their bags and made

their way out of the park and along the road to a dingy pub called the 'Boot and Ball.'

They went straight through the bar and into a private back room. There, a table was laid with sandwiches and soft drinks and thirty three odd chairs were scattered around waiting for them.

The men ate and drank hungrily for a while, before collapsing into the motley assortment of chairs.

'It may be a park,' said Stephan Scorovitch, 'But that is definitely the best training session we've had for months.'

There were nods and murmurs of agreement from the others.

'Better than this, anyway.' Groaned Audsley King. Holding up a tatty copy of that morning's Daily Mire, which he'd found on his chair.

They'd all seen it before but they still shuddered as he displayed the back page for them.

There was a picture of the Red Star players, covered in mud and falling over in their blind folds, and Safia 'Hot Notes' Dale's headline screamed at them from above it: -

**'It's Official - Highgate Players close their eyes to
dreadful season!'**

A gloomy silence fell over the room again. Then Vijamo spoke up.

'Anyway,' he said. 'Without the great Argentinean we seem like the old team.'

'And..' said Ravimondo. 'I've booked this room for the week for our own private team meetings and we'll meet in the park every day after club training. With any luck we might just get ourselves sorted for Saturday and we might just give Highbury a run for their money.'

'But..' Said Jacob. 'That's all very well, except we can't pick the team can we? I mean what's the point if half of the old regular team are on the bench and no disrespect..' He looked round at the new members of the squad, brought in by Grahmidov in the last few weeks. '..No disrespect, but the new boys are on the field instead.'

'That's right.' Said Alfred. 'I mean, he won't even have you in the team, will he?'

He looked at Ravimondo.

'No. He won't.' said Ravimondo.

'It's hopeless.' Sighed Euan. 'As long as Georgi Grahmidov is manager, even if a miracle happened and we beat Highbury, we're finished. We just don't have the training or the tactics or the players anymore. No. It's relegation for us.'

Ravimondo stood up. His eyes were flashing.

'Don't say that!' he snapped. 'Never give up! Never stop trying. That's how Red Star play their football and that's how we'll cope with this.. And besides which, well, things may not be so bad as you think.'

Vijamo grinned at his brother. 'That's right.' He said. Then he looked round the room at the other players. 'Things may not be so bad, after all.'

'Me and Ravimondo,' he continued, '..were thinking that there has to come a time when Mr Ideales, our chairman, realises that even he has made a mistake and that second cousin or not second cousin, Georgi Grahmidov just isn't the man for the job.'

'That'll be the day.' Said Sid. 'I mean we've lost nine games in a row and he still hasn't got rid of him.'

'Ah,' said Ravimondo mysteriously. 'Perhaps it needs more than losing. Perhaps it needs, well, *something else!*'

'Like family honour, or the lack of it, anyway.' Said Vijamo.

The squad sat up at these words and looked closely at the two brothers.

'You've got something up your sleeves!' Said Ryan.

'Go on,' said Dylan. 'What's the idea.'

'Gather round.' Said Ravimondo. 'And keep your voices down.'

An hour later the squad left the 'Ball and Boot' and if you looked very closely at them you'd have noticed that there was a certain swagger to their step that definitely hadn't been there when they arrived.

Saturday. Match day. The day of the game. Not just any game but the great game, the derby game between Highbury Harriers and Highgate Red Stars.

The old rivals, the bitter contestants in an on-going battle for supremacy. The aim, to be recognised as greater than the other, to win at all costs.

The derby game. The great game.

Crowds of fans spill out of tubes and trains and take the long walk up White Fox lane to the Highgate stadium. They gather in small groups outside of the ground, chatting over the prospect of the match ahead and some of them wander over to the many souvenir stands and stalls that line the way. Mounted police watch impassively on the look out for trouble, which there never is at Highgate, even when playing their bitterest rivals.

The turnstiles click and fans flood through them, anxious to be there in the stadium, close to their heroes and to the battle that will follow

Inside the stadium orderly queues form at the underground burger bars and fans happily buy and munch their way through greasy buns filled with some nameless meat and weeping onions and slurp tasteless, steaming tea in polystyrene cups. It doesn't matter that the food and drink are terrible. This is the game. This is the club. This is the MATCH of the season and everything is forgiven.

A few fans have already taken their seats - even though the players won't even come out to warm-up for another twenty minutes, but they want to be there, to see the green grass of the pitch, to look up at past glories

relayed on the giant screens, just to be part of it, to feel the atmosphere, to be able to say that they were there.

In the Directors' box high in the stadium in the centre of the row of the hospitality boxes, the Chairman of the Red Stars, Osvaldo Ideales, fiddled nervously with his tie.

It was going to be a tough day and he could feel it with every fibre of his being.

He glanced apprehensively at his guests. Daniel Brinkmeyer was Managing Director of Timpson's Travel, who were the Red Star principal sponsors and he was not a happy man. In fact he was standing in the corner of the box, puffing on a fat cigar looking depressingly ill-humoured.

He and Osvaldo had, had an unpleasant conversation earlier in the week in which Mr Brinkmeyer had made it very clear that if the club's performances didn't improve 'pronto' (as he put it) they would be looking for another sponsor next season.

That sponsorship was worth a lot of money and Osvaldo Ideales had a sinking feeling that today's match was

going to be a disaster and he would be losing Timpson's name from his club's shirts sooner, rather than later.

It was all the fault of that fool cousin of his Georgi Grahmidov.

He shouldn't be the manager of a girls' net ball team, he thought angrily to himself, let alone a premier league club.

What did he know about football? Nothing! What did he know about tactics? Nothing! What did he know about training? Nothing!

The only reason he was there was because of the debt of honour that Osvaldo felt he owed his cousin Mario.

Osvaldo looked across the box at a portly, grey haired man in an incongruously light weight, white suit, much more suited to the hot climes of Argentina than a cold grey day in North London.

Mario Maragona had flown in from Buenos Aires that morning. He was anxious to see how his son, Georgi was getting on in his impressive new job and to see his cousin Osvaldo again and to remind Osvaldo of his duty to the family - to keep Georgi employed and off the streets.

Oswaldo shuddered. His uncle was a ruthless man. He would love to go over to him and tell him that his son was an incompetent fool and that he was destroying one of the best football clubs in the world. But he had no desire to find himself lying at the bottom of the sea, with a lead weight attached to his feet!

Mario Maragona, may have looked like an innocent old man but he was in fact a merciless gang land leader, who ran the Argentinean equivalent of the Italian mafia!

So, instead of telling him what he thought of his son, Oswaldo raised his glass of sherry to the old man in a silent toast. The old man nodded and smiled and continued his conversation with the attractive lady who was head of Public Relations for Timpson's Travel - who seemed to have agreed to give him a free flight back to Argentina - though she couldn't think how he had persuaded her to do so!

Yes. This was to be an important match on a number of fronts. Oswaldo gulped back his sherry. Well, the match might go wrong but at least the food and drink would be good.

Oswaldo prided himself that lunch before the game, served to his guests in the Director's box, was a feast worthy of kings. His buffet lunches were famous in football circles and he was relying heavily today on this

gastronomic feast impressing his two difficult guests and taking their minds off the awfulness of the defeat that he fully expected the club to suffer at the hands of Highbury Harriers.

There was just one possible problem with the meal. It was the desert - a thick custard trifle, covered in hundreds and thousands and to be served in a large cut glass bowl.

Apparently, this was the favourite pudding of cousin Mario and for years it had been made for him by only one person - his son, Georgi! Much against Osvaldo's better judgement he had agreed to allow Georgi access to the club caterer's kitchens and any moment now Georgi was due to deliver the desert to the director's box himself.

Somehow, Osvaldo knew that something would go wrong.

In the home team's changing rooms the entire squad, whether selected or not had gathered together.

Right now they were huddled together in a circle, their arms around each other's shoulders.

'So, we all know what do?' Ravimondo asked in a hushed voice.

The others nodded.

'Then good luck, team. This could be our greatest moment or it could be the end of our careers but whichever way it goes, I just want to say that it has been a pleasure to play football with you over the years.'

They huddled closer.

'The Red Stars!' Said Vijamo.

'The Red Stars!' The others repeated and the huddle broke up, each man went his separate way to his appointed task.

Georgi Grahmidov stood in his office admiring the glass bowl filled with the delicate infusion of custard, cream, sponge cake and fruit that he had carefully crafted that morning.

He sighed. He hated football and he knew that he didn't know much about it and that he was a rotten manager but he loved cooking, especially making sweets. If only his father had let him train to be a chef as he had wanted to - but his father was obsessed by sport and therefore, Georgi had been forced to follow a varied and usually

disastrous career in a variety of sports, all of which he hated.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at his door.

It was Vijamo. He wanted Georgi go at once to the front office where there was a visitor waiting for him.

Georgi was only gone for five minutes but it was long enough for Vijamo to slip into his office behind his back and sprinkle a few drops of a clear liquid into the steaming cup of coffee that Georgi had left on his table. For good measure he put a few drops into the trifle as well. He wasn't sure what the trifle was for, but he thought it was probably for his manager's lunch, so he reckoned it was a good idea.

He swiftly completed the other task he had been assigned and he was long gone by the time Georgi returned, fuming at his wasted journey. There had been no visitor and the receptionist in the office hadn't known what he was talking about.

Georgi Grahmidov gulped back his coffee in one and then carefully picked-up the glass bowl and carried it upstairs to the directors' box.

Oswaldo's guest seemed to enjoy their lunch and he was beginning to feel a little happier about things. They sat in front of the large glass window watching the teams warm-up. Daniel Brinkmeyer sat bedside Oswaldo, carefully finishing every last drop of trifle, scraping his bowl noisily!

It must be good, thought Oswaldo, he couldn't be sure, as he hated sweet things and he hadn't tried the trifle himself. Also, he rather suspected that anything made by that fool Georgi Grahmidov, would probably be appalling or possibly poisonous.

'Well, I hope Georgi's team selection this week, is as good as this trifle.' Said a much happier, Daniel Brinkmeyer and he almost smiled as he put down his bowl.

Oswaldo glanced out at the odd collection of players which did not feature his star striker, Ravimondo, nor Alexei Keanley, nor his number one goalkeeper Stefan Scorovitch but relied heavily on some untried youth players.

He couldn't think what to say, so he nodded instead.

Meanwhile Georgi was in his office getting ready to take his place in the dug-out for the start of the game. He was pulling on his XXL size tracksuit and sweating a

little because it was too tight, when he suddenly felt rather odd.

There was a definite sinking feeling in his stomach and then a sudden gripping pain and then a feeling of sinking again, followed by a whirling sensation.

Quite suddenly and definitely unexpectedly, he broke wind with a thunderous and malodorous clap, like a howitzer going off.

The fat little manager grabbed at his portly belly, as if trying to bring it under control and before he knew it, he had to break wind again...

Only this time, he realized too late, that it was a little more than wind!

Clasping one hand to his bottom and gripping his revolving stomach with the other, he moved much faster than he had done in a very long time and positively sprinted through his office door, down the corridor and through the welcoming door of the Gents.

Up in the Directors' Box, Osvaldo was trying valiantly to make small talk to Daniel Brinkmeyer but he was acutely

conscious as he did so of a sudden and very odd smell that wafted up to his nose.

Daniel continued to talk animatedly but there was a look of horror on his face.

'Good Lord,' thought Osvaldo. 'Mr Brinkmeyer has just farted!' And he suddenly felt quite pleased to find that the great man was human after all!

At that moment there was a tremendous commotion on the other side of the room. Osvaldo turned to see his cousin Mario, elbowing his way through the other guests, his hands grasping his stomach, his face distorted with pain.

'Out of my way!' he was screaming. 'Where ees the gents lavatory? I need the Gents lavatory!'

He pushed open the door and made a very rapid exit down the corridor.

'Will you excuse me' said a white faced Daniel Brinkmeyer. 'Only, I think I too need.. Indeed. Oh yes. Indeed I do.. Oh, OOOH! Goodness.. Excuse me...'

Suddenly the managing Director of Timson's Travel was moving with a surprising turn of speed in the wake of cousin Mario.

Oswaldo's jaw dropped open as one by one his guests became ashen, clasped their stomachs and rushed for the door until they formed a terrible jam of writhing, groaning, and it must be said, farting bodies all wedged in the doorway, climbing over each other with the urgent need to find the club's executive toilets.

Within minutes Oswaldo was standing alone in the room.

He scratched his head. Odd, he thought. It must be something they ate.

And then it dawned on him that he was feeling fine. But they'd all eaten the same food. There was the smoked salmon, the prawn sandwiches, coronation chicken, green salad, pasta salad, tomato and Mozzarella, cold chicken ham, cold roast beef and then the trifle...

The trifle! Oswaldo smacked his forehead as it dawned on him. The one thing he hadn't eaten. The trifle.

And then he scowled. Not just any trifle. Georgi Grahmidov's trifle!

Somewhat shaky, very ashen and rather embarrassed, the guests had reassembled in the directors' box. In true British fashion everyone was trying to pretend that

nothing had happened, only Cousin Mario was complaining loudly.

'Ees terrible.' He was saying loudly to anyone who would listen. 'I thought my, 'ow do you say in Eeeengleesh, my bum, she would explode. Phew! Whata do you people put in your salads?'

Oswaldo couldn't resist.

'Actually,' he said. 'I think it was the trifle. You see I was fine and I was the only one who didn't...'

'My God!' Screamed Mario. 'The trifle. But my sonna cooka the trifle?'

'Yes,' said Oswaldo. 'So he did!'

'Why that sonna mine. Ee is in bigga trouble now, I tella you. I told eem he was a no good cook!'

'Not much of a manager either.' Said Daniel Brinkmeyer. The teams are out but he's not with them!'

Oswaldo looked through the glass. Sure enough the teams were lining up and the two captains were in the centre circle with the ref but there was no sign in the dug-out or anywhere else of Georgi Grahmidov.

Having drunk the coffee and eaten several bowls of trifle, Georgi's need for the toilet was greater than most and it was some time before he reappeared - pale and sweating.

Suddenly he heard the distant roar of the crowd that heralded the arrival of the teams on the pitch.

Realising he was late he rushed down the corridor to his office, grabbed his tracksuit top and sprinted hastily for the tunnel, pulling it on as he went.

Now, over the last few months, Georgi Grahmidov had become used to getting a bad reception from his own supporters. His failings as a manager, his dropping of key players, his poor tactics and his refusal to player Ravimondo, the fans' favourite all added up to a bad feeling from the supporters but today..

Well, today, as he stepped out of the tunnel onto the pitch, he was shocked at the cat calls and the cacophony of noise, louder than he had ever heard it before. They were even throwing their programmes and polystyrene cups at him.

He walked on though, steering a steady course towards the dug-out but wishing inside that he had never heard of The Red Stars.

In the directors' box Osvaldo was holding the phone with a shaking hand and speaking to the head of security.

'Get someone on the pitch now,' he barked, 'and get that thing off him.'

Below him, oblivious to the anger he was causing, Georgi Grahmidov was marching towards the dug-out, resplendent in a Highbury Harriers tracksuit top, that he had pulled on in his haste without looking at it. It was the tracksuit top that Vijamo had swapped for his own.

With Georgi at last in the dug out and in the correct outfit, the game began.

It was, as the fans feared and Osvaldo had predicted, a terrible first half.

Highbury Harriers were rampant from the kick-off. They teased the inexperienced Highgate mid-field with darting

runs and quick passing leaving the inexperienced youth team players flat footed or sprawling on the ground.

And when Terry Hendry made a stabbing run past the midfield and dribbled the ball straight into the path of young Mick Lewis, Jim Sullivan's replacement, there was no competition.

Hendry held the ball up in front of him, placed his foot over it, flicked it between both his feet and then neatly nut-megged Mick, picking the ball up deftly from behind the player and striking it at once, with deadly accuracy past the Highgate Goalie (another new boy Jim McCormack), sending it thudding into the back of the net.

One, nil to Highbury and with only ten minutes gone.

Twenty minutes later and Highgate were struggling to stem the onslaught - virtually every man was in defence and it was only thanks to the incredible efforts of Vijamo that Highbury hadn't scored another two or three goals.

Vijamo seemed to be everywhere. He ran tirelessly at attacking players and tackled them, regardless of his own safety and with a deadly hunger that had to be seen to be believed. But eventually even he couldn't hold back the flow of the Highbury team. Without the support of a more experienced mid-field and with a terrible lack of

cohesion between the Highgate players another goal, this time a header flicked in off a corner, was inevitable.

Two, nil to Highbury and the Harriers were rampant.

In the Directors' box Osvaldo held his head in his hands. Daniel Brinkmeyer, puffed on his cigar with an angry look on his face and even the irrepressible Mario began to look miserable. It was slowly occurring to him that his son had no idea what he was doing. He could no more manage a football team, than he could make an edible trifle. He looked down on Georgi, who seemed utterly deflated by all that was happening and sat slumped in his seat in the dug-out.

At that moment Freddie Iceberg connected with a long pass from Hendry and booted a rocketing shot from five yards outside the box. Three, nil to the Harriers and the game looked like it would become a rout.

It was a huge relief all round when the half time whistle went.

As they sipped their half-time drinks, Osvaldo was amazed to find Mario sidling up to him. He took Osvaldo by the arm and steered him away from the others to the far end of the room.

'Osvaldo,' he said solemnly. 'You have been a good cousin to me. You have taken my son and given him a very responsible job. For this I thank you. But you know sometimes acting for the honour of the family can be a mistake. This is not what I wanted for you.. or for Georgi. Tell me, and be honest, as a manger of football my boy is an fool, yes?'

Osvaldo hesitated and then he thought about the 60,000 fans whose dreams were being shattered and about the agonies of the last few months. He swallowed hard and then he spoke;

'No. No, cousin. Your son is not a fool. He is a complete and utter incompetent idiot!'

He waited for the outburst from the old man. Perhaps even for something worse: - What was that bulge in his jacket pocket?

But the old man nodded. He felt a slight twinge in his stomach from the after affects of the trifle. It helped him to make-up his mind.

'Fire him,' he said. 'Do it now and do something about thees game - quickly. Quickly! Before eet ees too late'

But it was too late. A fanfare of recorded music indicated the return of the players to the pitch.

But instead of boos and cat calls from the crowd there came the sound of cheers and whistles.

Osvaldo looked out of the window. The stadium DJ was announcing substitutions to the Highgate team and there, leading out the players was Ravimondo, followed by Stefan Scorovitch, and Alexei Keanley who walked beside Vijamo, who was grinning from ear to ear.

In the manager's office Georgi Grahmidov was throwing a few of his personal belongings into a bag.

He had decided what to do half-way through the first half and at the interval he had simply told the players that he apologized for all the errors he had made, that he was no longer prepared to do a job for the sake of his father that he absolutely hated and he wished them well for the future and they should put on the pitch who they wanted and play whatever tactics suited them.

From that moment the Red Star players discovered their old confidence. It came flooding back to them and grew by leaps and bounds as they watched Ravimondo pull on his strip and the captain's armband.

'Like old times eh, brother?' Vijamo had said, as they walked out to the cheering crowd. 'Like old times.'

At the back of the stadium Georgi Grahmidov climbed into a cab.

'Where to?' asked the driver.

'The Pru Leith school of cookery.. and step on eet. I have a lot to learn - in a hurry.'

Georgi Grahmidov sank back into his seat and a huge weight seemed to fall from his shoulders.

On the pitch it was as if the Red Star players had lost a weight from their shoulders too.

Right from the kick-off they played with a renewed vigour and energy. Suddenly Highbury found themselves being forced back into their own half by The Red Star's intimidating display of mid-field play. Vijamo was everywhere again, but this time he was not adding to the defence but squirting neat through-balls to the strikers or taking the ball cleverly on his feet and dribbling round the Highbury defence as if it was a Sunday School outing.

Time and again he whipped a long ball cross-field to Ravimondo on the right wing, who would take it perfectly with one touch, either to chip it onto Alexei Keanley, the central striker or to make his own low shot towards the left hand post.

Then after ten minutes of hectic and exciting play came the break-through.

Vijamo was striding towards the Highbury goal, in close control of the ball at his feet, when the Highbury defender Silus Macbell lunged in with a brilliant challenge. He didn't quite get possession of the ball and for a second it flew loose between both players. Vijamo had been up-ended by the impact of the challenge but somehow, though he was sitting on the grass at this point, he reached a toe out for the ball and managed to nudge it out of the reach of Macbell. Then in an instant, and demonstrating his amazing athleticism and fitness, Vijamo had scrambled to his feet in one fluid movement and was back on the ball. He stepped inside another flying attack from the Highbury right back and there was only the goalie between him and the net. In an instant Vijamo had swept a left-foot finish, low and to the keeper's right, into the back of the net.

The crowd stood as one and roared their approval. The Highgate players gathered round the young midfielder and

lifted him to the heavens but there was no time for celebration. Two goals were still need to force the draw; four for a win, though that seemed to be an impossible dream.

Perhaps, at this stage, the fans would have settled for another goal or two and for getting back some of their dignity; perhaps the newspaper pundits and TV commentators were impressed by the start to the second half but were still writing Highgate off - but whatever anyone else may have felt, Ravimondo was there, bustling round his players as they retreated for the kick-off, and screaming his mantra at them: 'Never give-up. Never stop trying!' For Ravimondo believed that anything was and could be possible, if you wanted it enough.

Five minutes later and Highgate found themselves under pressure again. They were being forced back towards their own goal and some clever inter-play between the Harriers mid-field and their attackers had wrong footed the Red Stars more than once.

Inevitably, Hendry found himself in front of an open goal. He lined up his shot and Stefan Scorovitch made a dash straight at him. It seemed to be the only way to cut off the inevitable bullet from Hendry's feet. But as Stefan charged, Hendry instantly changed his shot and instead of shooting he lobbed the ball delicately over the goalkeeper's head, towards the net.

For any other goalie the game would have been over - but Stefan was the quickest keeper in the league. The instant the ball left Hendry's toe, Stefan spun on his heel in mid stride, pivoted 180 degrees, ran back towards his goal mouth and incredibly, plucked the ball out of mid-air from over his own head.

The crowd gasped in surprise and then burst into ecstatic cheers as the goalie threw the ball an incredible distance down the right wing towards Ravimondo, who he had spotted in an instant as being unmarked.

Ravimondo took the ball without breaking stride and with perfect control he had covered fifteen yards as if the ball was glued to his feet, then he launched an amazing long range shot. It flew like a bullet, low to the ground and whistled past the Highbury goalie, who was completely wrong footed, and the ball thundered into the back of the net.

Two-Three and Highgate were rampant!

For the next ten minutes they applied more and more pressure on Highbury, who, under this new onslaught, were looking a fraction of the team they were in the first half. But still the Red Stars couldn't get that illusive third goal. Time and again their attack was forced back or their shots were off target or brilliantly saved.

And then in the dying minutes of the game Franklin Sydham slipped in a neat pass to Vijamo, who took the ball and dribbled it over to the left wing, made a quick dash for a few yards and stepped past a defender to bring the ball back into the middle of the field before launching a stinging shot on goal.

But the shot was fractionally high. There was a groan from the Highgate supporters as it cannoned off the cross bar and ricocheted back onto the pitch.

The fans needn't have worried. Ravimondo had followed his brother's shot in and he collected the ricocheting ball on his head, smartly nodding it down to make a low header into the corner of the goal, past a dazed keeper.

Three all!!

The fans went mad. The Red Star players punched the air. A draw was enough.

But not enough for Ravimondo! As they went back for the kick-off, full time clicked up on the stadium clock but the fourth official had held up his board. Two minutes extra time. Just two minutes.

'Never give-up! Never stop trying.' Shouted Ravimondo.

And the crowd heard him and picked-up the refrain.

'Never give-up!' They chanted. 'Never stop trying!'

Fired-up by the chanting crowd, Red Star quickly regained possession after a poor kick-off by the rattled Highbury team.

And then disaster...

Alexei Keanley had broken free and had a near clear run at goal, without being challenged and found himself on the edge of the Highbury box, with only the goalie between him and a famous victory but incredibly he scuffed his shot, dragging his studs into the turf. The ball, instead of rocketing into the back of the net dropped lamely into the goalkeeper's outstretched arms. He whipped it away at once to a Highbury player and suddenly Highbury were half way down the pitch and into attack.

The ball was passed swiftly from player to player and they shrugged aside Highgate's tackles, until the ball ended up with Hendry.

He had only to readjust and launch a shot and surely victory would be theirs.

But from nowhere Vijamo appeared. He slid in an inch perfect tackle, his outstretched body sliding over the turf, his boots picking the ball off Hendry's toes with immaculate precision, dispossessing him, even as he balanced himself to shoot.

The crowd went mad. Especially when Vijamo was back on his feet and charging with the ball on his toes, down the pitch.

He slipped in a neat pass to Audsley King, who in turn touched the ball onto Franklin Sydham, who picked out Jacob de Roth, who cracked a pass onto Euan Cunningston, which he chested down and slotted back to Audsley King, who took it with one touch and pushed it through to Tom McRaeston, who in turn steered it towards Ryan Carlos, who flicked it onto Jacob de Roth.

Jacob side-stepped one defender and then another and slipped a neat, low pass onto Ravimondo.

The rest has become Red Star folklore. Ravimondo never missed a shot from that range. He had practised them for hours, day and night sometimes, man and boy.

He struck the ball sweetly and powerfully. The Highbury Goalie dived for the ball but it went like an Exocet missile under his outstretched body and ballooned into the net.

Four - three. The Highgate Red Star team had beaten the Highbury Harriers in a never to be forgotten match.

The whistle blew. The game was over. The fans celebrated until the stadium shook and a delighted team applauded them and acknowledged them and their loyalty.

In the director's box Osvaldo Ideales wiped a way the sweat from his brow and if the truth be told, a little tear from his eye and Daniel Brinkmeyer suggested they should meet in his office the next day, to discuss a renewed contract to sponsor the team for another three years at least.

In the press box Safia 'Hot Notes' Dale was putting the finishing touches to her match report.

'And so, once more,' she wrote, '..This great team is back on-song. A team of heroes and great players. It would be unfair to single out any one player, this was a true team effort after all, but I have to mention Vijamo and Ravimondo - they are the kind of players who would grace any of the great teams anywhere in the world but I have a feeling they will be Red Star players for a very

long time to come. Today it was an honour to watch them play.'

That's the thing about Highgate, she thought, they're always good for a story. They're never dull!!

In the back of a London cab Georgi Grahmidov listened to the match commentary on the cabbie's radio. As the final goal went in, the cabbie spoke to him over his shoulder.

'Now that,' he said. 'Is what I call a good game. See, that's why we love football, innit?'

'Yes.' Said Georgi. 'Yes. It is.'

There is not much more to tell you. The players celebrated long and hard that night and patted each other on the back more than once.

But probably the best thing that happened to them was saved for the Monday morning training session.

As they trooped out onto the field once again, on a cold grey, foggy morning - a tall figure, wrapped-up heavily against the cold was waiting for them on the pitch.

'Morning lads!' said a familiar voice. 'Lot of work to do. We need to climb twelve places if we're going to win the league this year - so let's get on with it, shall we?!'

Marvin Cole was back.

The End