

A Proper Sunday League Tale

By Matt Perry



Gold Coaching 2-2 FC Twenty-Five
Purley Way playing fields, Croydon
September 15 2019

It was a fresh, autumnal morning in September in Croydon. The weather was a clear reminder that summer was on its way out for the year and with it, the start of the football season. At all levels, teams were beginning to get into full swing. The wind was gentle across the open fields of Purley Way and the skyline of the nearby town of Croydon could be seen overlooking the numerous pitches chalked into the overgrowing grass.

For Kelly, it was the start of a new chapter. The last six months had consisted of hard work and effort in order to ensure that his team, the newly founded Gold Coaching FC, were finally ready to embark on their first season as a football club in the Croydon Sunday League Division. For Conmee, this was also a new adventure. The lifelong friend of Kelly had never played Sunday league football and was eagerly anticipating the new challenge. Pel was nervous. He knew going into the season that he would be one of the players fighting for his place in the starting eleven each week and his fitness had deteriorated since the last time he played Sunday league football. Despite also being excited, Kelly was also edgy to see how the new team would work together in their first competitive match. The squad was made up of different groups of friends, many of who, had never met each other. A group of 19 to 28 years old lads who would now have to work together over the ongoing season. The referee blew the whistle to start the match.

As the first half progressed, Kelly thought the team wasn't playing effectively and was getting frustrated. He knew the pitch was small and not up to standard, with one corner on a slope making it harder to work, but in his eyes the team were not performing well compared to pre-season. Conmee had started on the bench and was running the line for the team and had already called one decision against the protest of the opposing side. Pel was cautious throughout the first half and couldn't get into the game well, he knew he wouldn't have the pace to take on a player one-on-one.

Gold Coaching were 2-1 down going into half time. At the break, Kelly's frustration broke through. "We're not sticking to the game plan out there boys, you're not working hard enough and no one looks like they want to stick a challenge in at all. Pel, do me a favour and sort your fucking feet out – I don't know what's going on but you look like you have two left feet." Pel remained silent to Kelly's comment and nodded. Conmee was coming on for the second half for his first taste of competitive football. Kelly knew that he needed to get adrenaline into his team and went in to the next 45 minutes with a new mind-set – he wanted the game to start getting rowdy.

Halfway through the second half, Kelly received the ball. He took on one player successfully but before he knew it, he was clattered to the floor out of nowhere as one of the opposing team challenged him shin-high. With his premediated mind-set, Kelly got up and pulled his opponent. "You dirty fucker" he bellowed into the face of the player as they squared up to each other. At this moment, Conmee wasn't alert to what was going on, whereas Pel, who had been subbed off, knew it was about to explode. Conmee was new to this scenario and followed the direction of the majority of his teammates, pushing, shoving and holding each other back from their opponents. Pel was on the side but wasn't one to get into fights. As the scuffle was dying down, he noticed out the corner of his eye that the other team's goalkeeper was now running towards the crowd of men. Before anyone could do anything, the opposing keeper swung his arm and punched Gold Coaching's striker Joe around the back of his head. Once more, this escalated the match with players trying to approach the goalkeeper.

Conmee said “Why the hell have you done that you dickhead”. One opposing player said to Conmee, “Seriously lad don’t go near him, he is an actual nutcase.” Kelly stayed calm and went straight to the referee. “You’ve seen what I’ve seen, he has to go for that”. Pel was on the side line trying to diffuse the situation from there, as the parents of some of the players tried to get on the pitch as well. The referee eventually came to her senses and sent off the FC Twenty-Five goalkeeper for the last 15 or so minutes of the half. With the advantage, Joe managed to get his revenge and scored, bringing the game to 2-2. As the final whistle blew, Conmee remained in high hopes for the oncoming weeks of football. Pel was annoyed as he knew he hadn’t played well. Kelly, who knew the team they had just battled weren’t as good as Gold Coaching had made them seem, said to his team “we knew it was going to be hard, being a new team and that, but we know what we can improve on looking forward. Now let’s all go to the pub.”



Sanderstead reserves 1-1 Gold Coaching
Ashburton Playing Fields, Croydon
October 6 2019

Gold Coaching FC's record up until now had been rather average; won one, drawn three, lost zero. Ashburton Playing Fields was not as exposed as Purley Way but the wet weather had left the pitch in a worn out condition. Conmee and Pel both noticed slight ditches in some parts of the muddy pitch which led to them filling them in by picking up soil from a nearby flowerbed – “proper Sunday league football that”, Kelly said.

Kelly was immediately put into a bad mood as Ewan, one of Gold Coaching's more important players, turned up to the match half an hour later than the agreed meeting time. Kelly began to confront Ewan. He had to make an example of him and show that there was no bias in the team, as Ewan was also one of his closest mates. This game was much more physical than any other they had played this season. For the first time, Conmee noticed that Sanderstead were a team who liked to kick at the ankles. Conmee knew he was inexperienced and also much weaker than the average footballer. He saw that they were a much snappier side who would shout and abuse the ref for any decision given against them.

The game had been tight, 1-1 since the first half and tempers had been flaring all game due to dodgy judgements from the referee. Kelly had been on the backend of most play during the game. Deep into the second half he chased the ball but to no avail as the opposition got there first. In the heat of the moment, Kelly decided to lunge for the ball, but too late. The opposing player got up from the ground and grabbed Kelly by the shirt before pushing him, shouting abuse in his face as the Gold Coaching player-manager received a booking from the referee. Around five minutes later, it became clear to Kelly that he now had a target on his head. Kelly had the ball and almost danced around two oncoming opposing players, all the time keeping control of the ball at his feet. Just as he was getting nearer to goal, Kelly was wiped out by the same player who he had taken out moments earlier. Kelly looked to the referee for action but did not receive the same treatment as his rival.

The rain began to pick up in the latter stages of the game, making it harder to see and all the while making the pitch boggy. Pel was now running the line for his side for the last ten minutes. He was being as fair as he could, even aggravating his own teammates with his reluctance to call one decision but tempers were starting to rise further. The game was now into added time and Sanderstead were about to push for one final attack in the match but, as they lifted the ball into the air towards their striker, and Kelly chased down the attacker who ran towards the goal, the game halted. Pel had put up the offside flag in what was a very tight call. Pel was surrounded by the opposing fans and players on the bench. “How the fuck can you call that there you cheating prick” said one. “Shame you've had to go and ruin a perfectly fine game you wasteman” said another. Pel remained defiant despite the abuse hurdling towards him, as spiteful as the rain hitting his worn-out face. The offside call resulted in a free-kick for Gold Coaching, with roughly ten seconds left on the clock. Kelly launched the ball as fast as he could with as much power behind it. The ball found the feet of Ewan on the six-yard line who, with mere seconds on the clock, shot just wide of the goal. Pel stood on the half-way line as the referee blew for full-time. He was annoyed that they could have won it in the last dying seconds, but also knew that if Ewan had scored, he would have been chased out of Croydon.

Selsdon Town 7-3 Gold Coaching
Norman Park, Bromley
CMSFL Challenge Cup
January 12 2020

The first game back from the Christmas break was always going to be a tough one. Despite playing with each other now for months, many of Gold Coaching's squad had not exercised since the last game back in early December. Not only this, but the team Kelly's side were facing in the cup were top of the division above their own. It was a bitterly cold day and the pitches in Bromley were frozen. Before kick-off, the home side, Selsdon Town were swapping between two pitches with buckets of boiling water, pouring them over frozen puddles.

Kelly went into the fixture optimistic but fully aware that this match would be an uphill climb from the first whistle. Kelly's ultimate goal this season was to get to a cup final. Pel and Conmee were also excited but also anxious, the side had only been able to bring twelve men, a side struck with minor injuries. Kelly and Pel inspected the pitch, which was rock solid. Both of them had played Sunday league football for years, both knew that it was a dangerous environment to play on. "It isn't safe to play on that, it's literally solid" said Kelly, whilst talking to the Selsdon Town players. "My first priority is to protect my players". The opposing team were keen to play and one argued back at Kelly, saying "All it needs is a bit longer in the sun, it'll be fine." Kelly replied "if someone breaks their leg it won't be fine."

As Selsdon tried to goad them into playing the match, Kelly called the squad together. Only Kelly and Pel were calling for the game to be called off. Conmee was with the rest of the squad who wanted the match to be played, despite the fears of the pitch as well as the small squad. The ultimate decision was left to the referee who said that the game would start, but for the first fifteen minutes, there were to be no slide tackles and heavy challenging. The game started.

Conmee had been frustrated before Christmas, he was on the outskirts of the team and was not getting as much game time as others, but now, and to his delight, he had no other option but to start the game at right wing. Conmee was playing well and even though he was not as natural as the likes of Kelly, he was improving as each game passed. This was by far the best team he been up against and he was giving all he had to fight them.

Despite going one goal down, to many peoples' surprise GC turned the game around and were winning 2-1 going into half time. The team were playing confidently despite the gap in quality between the two sides. Kelly had the ball at his feet, turning in and out, pushing the attack forward, pressing higher and higher up the pitch and running towards the defence until, he felt a pop. Kelly came to an abrupt stop. He screamed in agony. He realised straight away that he had torn his hamstring. Besides the pain, Kelly was disappointed, not only did he know that was the end of his match, that was the end of his season.

Pel now knew the team were at a disadvantage. Kelly was the player that kept the team playing well and now, with a bare eleven, the fight just got a lot more tough. On the verge of half time, Selsdon scored a scrappy goal to bring the game back level. Conmee thought Niall was going to be sick. He had never seen him look in so much pain. Kelly spent half his time back at school on crutches due to football, but this looked bad. With another two of the players now being forced to play whilst injured, the second half was looking tough.

Kelly was now irritated; he could see that his team were playing well at the end of the first half and not conceding before the break would have been instrumental. Kelly continued to manage the team from the side-line but as the game approached the 60th minute, he could see that his men had hit a wall. Pel was working hard in defence but now had less agility, and the other team towered over his side. The pitch was now the opposite of frozen and began to get slushy. Selsdon started to lob balls into the box. One went in. Then another. And another. Before they knew it, Gold Coaching were 7-3 down. On the side, Conmee, who came off injured as well for the last few minutes, was being heckled by the opposition. He felt they were now looking to intimidate him since it was clear they were about to win.

The final whistle came; Gold Coaching were out of the cup. All the side were exhausted but despite being annoyed, Kelly couldn't fault the effort displayed by his team. "We knew it was going to be tough. They are an entire division above us, and we almost had them. We lost it in the end down to fitness, but this shows the potential we have moving forward, this season and future seasons." Pel was surprisingly upbeat, he knew they were fighting a losing battle but also couldn't knock the heart they showed and his own ability to play a full game. Conmee was also satisfied. He had seen how far he had come in the first half of this season and how he had improved. Kelly brought the team together for one final huddle and told his team to go to the pub.



MATT PERRY

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Matt Perry writes an account of his experience playing in a newly-founded Sunday league men's football team - Gold Coaching FC. In it he shares the experiences of three different members of the team who all bring their own impressions of events which occur in three of the team's matches.