

The Birth of Girma Dali

by John Gorman

Amid the swerve and pulse of hungry bodies Girma Dali picks his spot, a tissue-wide patch of net where's he going to strike. A green-jerseyed defender closes in on him his brute momentum unleashed like a kamikaze pilot swooping into enemy orbit, his lunging body makes Dali cut the other way. After the defender has crashed, Dali has already made another charge, the pull-weight of his monster calves bring him within a sharp angle of the far post. Chalk and turf shoot from his hurried spikes. A rip of adrenaline carries through his thighs up his tall spine his arms pinch in at the elbows calm as old men napping in a hammock. His round wet bold, green eyes, more than anything else, lust for the back of the net. If only that would settle it, there are pyrotechnics rumbling in his gut firing signals to his brain mirroring back all the hardships, sacrifice, how he slipped free by the skin of his teeth and the ball waits before him a microcosm of his life, a crucible of his self-worth, he'd loved to sock the cover off, but its wound too well in his brain.

Sweat beads furiously down his flushed cheeks. He scrambles. A nervous tick clamps hold of his motor skills bites into him like senseless bacteria attacking an innocent host. He's careful, oh so brilliantly careful with his touch, sending a fake signal left and takes a meek chip right. The boot stopped by the goalkeeper. And just like that the cheers of some eighty odd thousand stadium fans, billions worldwide, whisk to a hush. The goalkeeper hurls the ball to his punchy defender. Life is good for a few more seconds, but at any moment, the ball is intercepted and the hopes and dreams of nations blow away like so much chalk dust.

Football is a game for legs and hearts. Girma Dali has put his soul into the game. He flies through defenders like he's got wings, his ferocious instinct makes him both feared and loved. He plays with breathtaking fluidity you feel like weeping. The moment somebody thinks they've nailed the grand alchemy that makes Dali a genius

somebody else came along and offers a new, kookier explanation. All agree Dali is a god in cleats.

He broke onto the international stage, seemingly out of nowhere, and arrived by accident. He played for a string of so-so clubs mainly in the MLS then landed a spot in the Japanese League. He never scored more than three goals in a single season. For five years, he had blown his national team tryouts. Last Spring an outbreak of a mysterious influenza knocked three men off the roster and in a desperate need of a warm, healthy body his name was penciled in. The Harambee Stars needed speed, discipline, a better coach, mental toughness, a goalie who didn't suffer from narcolepsy— they would've settled for one decent chipper whose committed work ethic might rub off on them. They were also kind of lazy. Coach Sangaré had flip-flopped the players' positions numerous times sure the winning combination was only a shuffle away. The whole while, the great spark, Girma Dali hugged the bench his wide green eyes gobsmacked at the streams of screaming fans that filled the stadium. He'd never seen so many people staring back at him, well, maybe not exactly at him since he was riding the bench, but at the players tearing up the sun-baked field.

The breakthrough game happened to be a friendly against Paraguay, three years ago to the day, when Moussa M'bami sprained his ankle and later Ken Ogolla was thrown out of the game for squeezing the referee's nipple. The Harambee Stars had bled through their whole roster save for the bright-eyed and jittery Girma Dali.

Coach Sangaré pointed at his last bench man the slouching Dali in his spotless white visitor's uniform, picking at grass. He had no idea he was being summoned into the game. He froze for an instant staring at a grass sprig wedged under his thumbnail. The Coach's bearded neck swelled, his nostrils flared, and he rushed Dali as if a manic rhino about to gore a snoozing poacher.

“Get in there,” Coach Sangaré yelled waving his stubby finger.

Girma Dali snapped out of his funk. He ran so fast he zipped out of his shoe. The battered leather lump tumbled end over end with its

laces tangled until it stopped to lay on its side, in the middle of the field like a spoiled child waiting to be scooped up by its parent. The other team snickered. Nobody had seen anything so ridiculous. They couldn't stop laughing, Paraguay's star forward nearly split his gut, but this didn't seem to bother Girma Dali who had waited his whole life for this golden opportunity and didn't bother to put back on his shoe. Big deal, as a kid he'd played many games in the street barefoot. There he honed his craft, his toes long since callused he could play on the side of a mountain, on top of a volcano. He was filled with the same ebullient desire from his youth.

The rest of the game the shoeless Girma Dali hustled with unparalleled zeal. He dashed with feverish glee, a crinkle of a smile splayed on his cool pink lips. In less than sixty seconds, he made his first touch with his shoeless foot. He dribbled to the outside past one then two defenders his ability to switch gears, midfield, left to right was marked by his almost rubbery legs bending at his whim. What looked like a hard pass turned out to be a fake, a short drift to the outside of the defender and Dali caught up to the ball then advanced a few yards from the box. When he ditched the last man he saw the lone Guaraníes' goalkeeper who was no longer laughing. Dali struck and was blocked. The goalkeeper cleared the ball and precipitated the race to the other end. Dali owned a few slick moves. He replayed the opposing team's gossipy cackling as he ran the length of the field with the growing urge to prove himself. When he crossed paths with his unlaced shoe he didn't stoop to retrieve it instead he kicked it past the foul line. This had his teammates, his coach, and the fans shaking their heads. His opponents howled not so much because they found him to be a joker, but because they thought he was nuts. Good, Dali thought. Let them think it. He carried on, majesty, Merlin, merrymaker with the ball. Everybody who had ever doubted his abilities stood before him, an angry phalanx of cacklers, he sped past them putting on what would later be dubbed "the exhibition" full of corner kicks, spirited tackles, and magic.

He did not make a single goal that game, but he was credited with a steal and two assists. His stock shot up in Coach Sangaré's eyes and the coach told the press that he had a secret weapon in Dali.

The next game he played with both his shoes. They didn't come off his feet. He didn't even bother to give his laces a tug. River Plate double teamed him and for the first half this seemed to do the trick in neutralizing the Harambee Stars' scoring drives. Dali managed to stay hungry on defense making a couple of steals, but when he ran in offensive mode he lost a step. His kicks skittered, didn't have the same teeth they had in his first game.

They were already in stoppage time when Dali squeezed into the penalty box tip-tapped the ball luring the goalie to the right and then booted it by him on the left. The game ended in a tie, but it was a sweet victory. The stadium erupted. It was astonishing to have such thunderous applause for the visiting Kenyans, but really there were many Boca Juniors fans on hand rooting against their most hated rival, River Plate. For fun, one of his teammates had decided to kick off his shoes. Then another and another until the whole team scampered around in socks.

Coach Sangaré eyed his players, but you could almost tell he'd been itching to join.

When the Harambee Stars matched up with the European squads they held their own. First, Czech Republic then Netherlands, Greece, and Ireland all of the matches fought hard. Dali got better each time out. His passes launched with stealth accuracy and he seemed just as happy to let his teammates take the goal or to drop back on defense and tangle with his opponents. The siren sound of the bench, a frightening ring, he'd always seemed to hear these things his will would not let him fall not now he'd come too far and so fast. The World Cup seemed an eternity away and yet it also felt a day away it was the perfect anomaly summing up Girma Dali's life things that should have been out of his reach suddenly came into tow. Yes, he'd had luck. Do you want to call it that? He owed a little to chance and didn't give himself enough credit. In Dali's eyes nested the ever-looming sense of debt.

