



## *Chapter 1*

# *The Captain*

The phenomenon that seems to alter everything but itself, is time. It always remains the same, always flows with the same pace, even though it may not always seem to. In the course of its flow it leaves behind things, people, it destroys everything old and creates new. Even though the chronological timeline witnesses something novel or renewed, the same cycle is always being repeated.

When a child first cries, it is quickly acquainted with toys of all kinds. Rattles, teddy bears, dolls and toy cars. These objects aid children in establishing the feelings of joy, interest and passion. However, throughout the process of growing up, one must relinquish these wonderful items with a heavy heart and find new ones. A human quickly outgrows toy cars and dolls, and it may happen that within the turn of a day, something that once meant a great deal to us doesn't seem appropriate anymore, because we are supposed to be too old for this and that.

In any case, there exists a toy appropriate for both sexes, all generations and age groups, for the poor and the wealthy, the old and the young. One such toy is an object with its own will, one which rarely stays put and also perfectly fits the grasp of our hands: the ball. It is interesting that it is one of the simplicities

that time does not affect. For the individual or for the masses, no-one is ever said to be too old or too young for a ball. The clock's power is feeble to the perspective of how one looks at a ball. However, one fact is certain; everyone loves to play. So, why not play with a ball? We can throw it, pass it, bounce it, catch it, but most of all, kick it. And when it comes to kicking, a whole new range of ideas flourishes.

A couple of centuries ago, a sport took root in which one is supposed to lead the ball only with one's feet. Once this type of game became more and more popular, a whole new kind of sport was established. Later on, plain connoisseurs and smaller influential figures wrote a book of rules, and on that day football was officially born. Today, football is the great leader, the emperor, the king, the absolute ruler among sports. A game that doesn't demand very much and gives plenty. A game dispersed across almost every corner of the world, anywhere where the sun shines.

The sun — a rectangle with horizontal blue and white stripes alternating from top to bottom, and in the left corner, a yellow sun smiling. A large part of the world of football is attached to this particular flag. And as the day in Montevideo started to present itself promisingly at the start of April, people filled the streets with cars, bikes and chatter. Some were heading to work, while others were already enjoying their lunch at work and at school. It wasn't morning because the day was already in full swing. The sun was beaming, the sky was cloudless, and it seemed as if summer had only just begun, even though the quicksilver seldom rose above 25 degrees Celsius. The pleasant temperature called upon some people to chat while drinking coffee or tea, others to go jogging or cycling. Apart from fishing boats, which had already wrapped up their route at sea, larger

ships awoke, gradually lifted their anchors, and transported cargo and passengers from the harbour.

As the sun rose higher and higher through the sky, it managed to reach every single hidden corner of the city. Among these was also the Don Boutique Hotel where everything flourished with life. In front of the building, which didn't resemble a 4-star hotel (mostly because of its facade that looked more like a costly housing unit, with no glass doors or windows to portray the lavish reception of the hotel), stood a crowd of freshly-arrived tourists. Guessing from their language they were probably Brazilians, because Uruguay borders the land of samba and football.

In room 309, in an apartment furnished in black and white with a gigantic plasma screen attached to the wall in the living room and a massive black-leather sofa, as well as a bathroom decorated in black and white tile, there lay a boy - a man - in his early 20's on a sizeable double bed.

He lay on his stomach with one arm under the pillow, the blanket covering only his thighs and waist, his muscular back facing the ceiling. Wearing no pyjamas and looking tired from the day before, the boy was presumably dreaming beautiful dreams, since a faded smile adorned his face, a smile that couldn't have been more innocent. His middle-length wavy hair stretched way over his ears and was nearly black, more black than brown, and soft, too soft for a man. His eyes were calmly shut, the colour of the forest floor in late autumn. His cheeks were slightly hairy, something that gave the boy a hint of masculinity.

The dead silence was interrupted by the ringing of the hotel's stationary phone. The hand which had been resting under

the pillow quickly stretched out toward the nightstand and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?” a mutter spread from the mouth of the young lad, who still hadn’t opened his eyes.

The pleasant voice of an older man could be heard through the receiver. *“Good morning, mister Victorino. I was wondering whether you have any special desires concerning today’s lunch? We missed you at breakfast an hour ago, so I am calling to make sure you are all right.”*

“What time is it?” asked Victorino, Raúl Victorino, with a clearer voice this time.

*“It is 5 past 10 in the morning, sir,”* said the voice over the telephone.

The lad’s eyes erupted quickly and revealed their brown depth. Shock took over the young man who jumped from the bed to his feet in the blink of an eye, as if struck by lightning. With a stunned and gasping voice he quickly said, “Ohhh—I overslept, again! Thank you for the wake-up call, Ernesto. Listen, no breakfast for me today, just make sure that my Porsche awaits me in front of the hotel. I need to make it to practice as quickly as possible.”

*“Nothing is easier than that, sir,”* responded Ernesto.

Quickly after that, young Raúl hung up the receiver and started running around his suite grumbling, “Stupid alarm clock! Not ringing again!”

First, he ventured to the kitchen, where he grabbed a yoghurt drink from the fridge and poured it down his throat in one gulp. After that he started digging through his cupboards. Raúl disarranged the shelves as if he was looking for a bomb that might go off in a matter of seconds. He found what he had been looking for – a croissant. Three bites and it was gone. With

a full mouth and no manners, he headed back to the bedroom where he opened up a wardrobe full of clothes. It was more than obvious that most of them were Puma sweatshirts, sweatpants and tracksuits. He got himself three shirts, one of which he pulled over his head to cover his enviable muscular body. The other two he threw on the untidy bed. He followed this by wrecking his wardrobe in search of pants and shorts. A pair of shorts and two pairs of sweatpants. He dressed himself in one of the latter, while the others he put on his bed.

Once more he rushed around his suite and brought a humongous sports bag from the living room. It could easily have been a travel bag for a whole family if it hadn't had the same sponsor logo. He laid the bag on his bed and threw in his shirts, pants and shorts, then raced toward the front door to the shoe cabinet. He opened three drawers and took out three pairs of sports shoes, two of which were cleats. Shoes with plastic or, in this case, metal studs on their soles that enable better traction on the pitch.

The two pairs of football boots landed in his bag without any hesitation, just like the rest of his clothes. The other pair of shoes had a standard sole, and young Raúl began to put them on in his suite. He sat down in the comfortable, black leather armchair that was positioned on the left side of the bed. It reminded him of that frightening chair of discomfort at the dentist's, only that this one served for comfort and had no head rest.

Like everything else, he also tied his shoes hastily. He stood up, leaving his left leg behind, stuck at the foot of the chair. He started wildly flapping his arms as if fighting the air around him. After three clumsy steps, he managed to regain his

balance, sighing nervously and rolling his eyes. “Is there more?” Raúl asked himself.

It seemed that there was nothing else left to be done. The lad stood there in the centre of the bedroom dressed in a white t-shirt that emphasised his broad shoulders and strong humeri, long black sweatpants, and black and white sport shoes. Thus prepared for practice, he looked out the window. The view of the harbour on such a sunny day thrust energy through his veins, making him hop slightly, grab his bag and keys, and dash through the door.

The suite became at once silent. Everything was the way it had been before - the bedroom, kitchen, living room and bathroom. Nothing had changed, only the fact that there was no one lying in bed. Silence continued to rule the suite.

A scrape and rattling of the door lock brought life back into the place. Raúl came flying – not running – in through the door. His teeth were gritted and he was breathing heavily. “Unbelievable!” He ran toward the nightstand where he grasped his cell phone, gave it an ugly look, put it in his bag and stormed out of the suite once more.

With a tempo no lesser than before, he raced down the hall, past the elevator, and down the stairs. His suite was on the third floor, so waiting for an elevator wouldn’t have paid off. Skipping every second step, the young man made a thunder-like entrance to the reception, but no one was behind the counter. He looked around anxiously in search of the right person, but in vain.

The automatic glass door drifted apart and behind them stood a man dressed in a white uniform with black lines around his collar, stretching from his shoulders down to his waist. In a way he resembled a sailor or a cruise ship captain. His hair gave

away his years because it was slightly grey, but mostly dark-brown and tied in a ponytail. At the tip of his nose, there was a subtle pair of reading glasses perched atop a neatly brushed moustache.

“There you are, Ernesto! Where is my Porsche?” asked Raúl.

The man answered, “I left him in the garage for a reason, sir.”

“Is that so? And what would that reason be?”

“A traffic jam, sir. An accident has happened on Avenida Uruguay. There is congestion from all directions, and, according to the radio, it would not do for one to be sat in a car right now, sir” the receptionist explained calmly.

Raúl ran his hand across most of his hair and exhaled through the nose. “What do you suggest, Ernesto?”

The wise words that came from Ernesto were: “I may allow myself too much, sir, but it is about 5 ½ kilometres from here to the stadium. That’s about an hour’s walk. *You* are an athlete, and if you put in a little effort, you can make it there in under 30 minutes. That is of course the possibility I thought of the quickest.”

The footballer looked at his watch, the face showing 10:15. After giving it a quick thought and checking his sports gear he made up his mind. “No, not at all, Ernesto! You’re right. This is the best way.”

Having said that, the lad grabbed one of his feet and pulled it back toward his backside. He repeated the action with the other foot, and then he started doing lunges and tuck jumps. Ernesto, who was still standing beside him, looked at him in surprise at first, but later on realised that athletes can’t get anything done without first finishing their stretches.

“May I ask you to keep the keys to my Porsche? I might call you later on and ask for someone to drive it up to the stadium. I wouldn’t like walking all the way back, if you understand?” asked Raúl while doing a forward bend.

“Of course, mister Victorino. Nothing easier than that,” replied Ernesto with a smile.

“You have a good day!” said Raúl and started sprinting down the street like a cheetah chasing a zebra. In the blink of an eye he disappeared from Ernesto’s field of vision, and Ernesto accompanied his incredible speed with his jaw dropped.

Shortly after, Raúl turned onto Calle Cerrito street — a long alley, almost completely straight, which didn’t have many pedestrians, and Raúl could “calmly” rush past them toward his destination. His sports bag was clattering and bouncing even though he held it close with his left arm, while his right swung back and forth as his legs propelled him onward.

Not much time had passed before he stormed past Banco de la Republica and past the Museu Histórico National. Calle Cerrito street ended there, and Raúl arrived at the square Plaza Dr. Julio Garcia Otero, right before Avenida Uruguay. He kept his eyes peeled looking out for crowds and preventing any accidents. Apart from the direction he had come from, all cars were frozen. Their flashing turn signals signified that something had happened on the road and that they would not be moving for a while, the noises produced by the drivers nervously pressing on their steering wheels suggested delicate and thin nerves.

Raúl whistled past faster than a bicycle. The curiosity of what had happened was still on his mind. Slowly his eyes began to perceive the location of the accident, slowing down his running. The impact of the two vehicles had been so soft that he



could recognise the brands and models of both of the cars. The first was a silver Volvo station wagon its rear having been wrecked by the black BMW that had, according to all laws of physics, crashed into it from behind so that the latter vehicle had ripped its front bumper and lights. As it turned out, the damage was only material, and nothing had happened to the drivers.

*"Thank God, it's not worse,"* thought Raúl and sped up Avenida Uruguay. Slowly the lad started showing signs that he had been running at full strength for more than two kilometres. The torque and speed from the beginning had slowly faded, as he turned onto Magallanes street and right after that to Calle Mercedes street. He ran raced past Juan XXIII Institute, and shortly after that, the thought of his coach's reaction to his tardiness filled his head. The last time he had done this, the coach had told him off and it hadn't been pleasant. He imagined the face of his coach screaming at him, saying, *"This is the second time this week, Victorino!"* and *"What kind of example are you setting for the others?"* and *"Make sure I don't give the armband to De La Vega or someone else!"*

His coach did not sound like a charming man in his mind. Overwhelmed by his thoughts, Raúl kept running, closer and closer to the stadium. He didn't realise he had left behind the street of Eduardo Victor Haedo and was now only metres away from his destination. He started to feel his legs tiring, unlike the average person who would have lost both of his lungs and legs even before Avenida Uruguay at a pace like that.

"Come on, come one, just a little more, let's go," the footballer encouraged himself and made sure that his pace didn't drop drastically even after five kilometres. Morales road was the last one, and the farther Raúl sped down it, the more Estadio Centenario began to open up before him.

In his head, Raúl searched for excuses he might feed his coach and so dodge additional questions and unwanted conversations. Accident, illness, or the truth? Which was the best choice? But because he was a stand-up bloke, he decided to tell the truth. This was one of his best qualities, since he was almost incapable of telling a lie.

The Fuente Iluminada roundabout was the point where Raúl left the asphalt behind and disappeared under the trees. He stopped running and looked at his watch that showed 10:31.

“Even German trains aren’t that fast,” Raúl boasted out loud. When he raised his head, he saw the scenery that would assure him he was in the right place even if there was a litre of Mexican tequila running through his veins. The little auxiliary pitch right beside the stadium had about 20 or more footballers running on it. Behind that pitch, the stadium soared to the sky. Even though it is an old construction, Estadio Centenario accepts a little over 70,000 hot-blooded Uruguayan fans. Raúl always imagined it packed full, and it always gave him quick chills down his spine.

He approached the pitch, and as he did, another person walked toward him. It was a man in his 50s, with a stooped posture and with short black hair that had a shade of grey developing above the ears. He was walking quickly and vigorously, dressed much like Raúl, only that his outfit was completely black. The footballer knew what was coming. The man was his coach. His name was Alfredo Fernandez.

“Do you have any idea what time it is, Victorino?” Alfredo asked in a loud, ironic voice.

Raúl put his hand on at the nape of his neck, looked at him meekly and said, “I know, coach. But look, I don’t know how, but—” yet Alfredo did not let him finish.

“I don’t care, Victorino! You are an hour and a half late for practice, and it’s not the first time this week! Do you have any idea what kind of example you are setting for the others?”

Raúl kept his laughter at bay, because he had known that his coach would say this. “Yes, I know it’s not the best example, but I ran all the way from my hotel—” he defended himself, but was once again interrupted by Alfredo.

“From the hotel? Time, Victorino, how long did it take you?”

“16 minutes,” said Raúl proudly.

Alfredo looked pleased. “Well, at least that’s something. That is why you are the leader, but as a captain you will also have to contribute a lot more outside the field. You are this team’s leader, apart from me, of course.”

Before Raúl could confirm his statement, he heard voices raising from the pitch as his teammates called toward him, “Hey, Raúl! Overslept again, did you?”

Victorino only raised his hand in salute and smiled, but new comments followed, like, “Now I know I need to buy you an alarm clock for you birthday!” and “Can’t that Porsche of yours overtake a turtle?” and “We’ll get you a girl, Victorino, so that she’ll wake you up, since you can’t do it yourself!”

The last statement triggered the most laughing among the players, and it made Fernandez turn, glance at them fiercely and shout, “No break until I say so!”

Raúl gave his coach a smile and said to him, “Freddy, I promise I won’t be late again. This hasn’t happened before and it will never happen again. Just look behind you. The team is falling apart without me on the field.” He said this while sniggering.

Fernandez did not look amused. “Sometimes you can be worse than Alejandro and Hernan combined. And don’t call me Freddy. It’s ‘coach’ for you.”

“Understood, coach,” said the lad, but still whispered “Freddy” behind him as Fernandez turned his back.

They both walked to the pitch, where they were followed by curious faces, but Raúl and Alfredo did not pay them any attention. “Get dressed and put your shoes on. Do some stretching and make sure you warm up. Go in in about 20 minutes,” said Fernandez. “Be happy that I am even letting you train this week, Victorino. Although it is only a friendly match against Colombia, we must still prepare as best as we can for the World Cup in June, do you understand?”

Raúl replied, “Yes, understood.”