



SAM'S BIG GAME *Kasey Symons* **OPEN WINNER**

Kasey grew up in Mildura, Victoria before moving to Melbourne to attend university and pursue her dream of sport writing. She has worked within the AFL landscape in various roles for over six years including marketing and PR as well as social media game day coverage and match report writing. Kasey is also still pursuing academic goals and is currently completing her PhD at Victoria University. Her work focuses on gender performativity in female fans of elite male sports.

SAM' BIG GAME

Air instantly escapes both lungs after a solid thud against the chest, a winding blow that brings the body to the ground. Sam coughs violently for a moment before desperately gasping to replace the lost oxygen.

That was some hit.

'Shit! Sorry Sam!'

Riley pulls Sam back up from the rough ground, head still spinning, Sam tries to shake it off so no one notices the impact of the blow.

'No problem.' Sam replies breathlessly. 'Good hit, mate.'

Riley pats Sam on the back, a comradely seal of approval from the captain. 'That's the spirit!' He yells over his shoulder as he bounds off back into the action.

Limping, Sam slowly regains the ability to run back into the pack, pushing through to complete the remaining routine drills before the coach signals the end of training with a cacophonous assault from his rusty whistle.

'Bring it, bring it in.' The coach rallies the sweaty troops, uniforms all stained with grass and red dirt from the dry football oval. It is the last chance for a final word on strategy before tomorrow's big game against their sworn rivals, the River Cats.

The coach is Riley's dad, Martin. A large man with bad leg from his footy days, he is still surprisingly fit and regularly runs around with the team. He loves football and the club he and his father before him had played for, their legacy continuing with Riley who will make them proud.

'We've made a lot of improvements guys but we are still getting too run over, too tired when it counts and if we don't push through that we'll always be two steps behind them if they pull away with a lead.' Martin paces in front of them, sternly assessing the team's weary bodies.

'It doesn't take long to get a run on and concede a few goals if we are too slow. They'll take advantage of that, they'll spot that weakness easily, they will smell the weakness on you and laugh at you! The work you will need to put in to get the margin back will be torturous and painful. We don't need to go through that if we can stay fit and run the game out. Don't let it happen. Don't ever get tired! Now everyone get a good night's sleep in – if I see any of youse on the streets you'll be on the bench, no excuses!' He waves his finger accusingly at them, no one would dare mess up before such an important game and have to answer to him, no one would dare to risk miss playing all together.

'Tell ya mothers to cook up a feast, we need to eat well, we need energy, we need hunger, we need to win!' Martin belches his final line to motivate the team.

'Yeah!' Everyone cheers and slaps each other on the back before heading into the concrete shower blocks adjoining the senior team's change rooms.

Sam didn't shower with everyone else in the stained shower block. Home wasn't far and it made more sense to shower there in comfort.

'Sam!' Martin spits.

'Yes?' Sam turns defensively to face him hoping that it isn't going to be a spray about anything in particular that hadn't been up to scratch in training. And that he hadn't noticed the impact of the hit.

'Good effort today, kid. You got hit a few times but you always got up. If you can get up and back into the pack faster you'll be an unstoppable defender one day. Continue to work on your recovery.'

'Thanks.' Sam looks down shyly.

'I mean it. I'm going to be sad to lose you after this weekend. I hope you can make me proud tomorrow, and make yourself proud. It's your last chance. Make it worth it okay?'

Martin places a reassuring hand on Sam's shoulder and their eyes lock fiercely for a moment. Sam understands Martin is being genuine; that he sees potential and is disappointed that after this weekend, Sam would no longer be eligible to play in his team.

Sam smiles awkwardly and begins the walk home as echoes of the rest of the team chanting crude versions of the club song ring from the shower blocks.

The sun is harsh, beating down unforgivingly. Central South Australia isn't an ideal region to play football but Sam couldn't not play: it is the best game in the world.

Sam's training guernsey rapidly soaks through from the searing sun. Beads of sweat fall onto the bare concrete footpath, evaporating as soon as they hit the ground. Jelly legs from the hard training session not yet worn off are making the walk difficult but craving the shower, Sam keeps up the pace. Not far now, just around the corner, just like the end of Sam's football season.

The rest of the team are pumped up to tackle the match head on, to tear it apart with their teeth and win. They are motivated by years of bad blood between the River Cats and their team, the East Lions, a rivalry handed down from fathers to their sons, a rivalry that existed for the sake of perpetuating a rivalry.

A rivalry that most likely started because thirty years ago a Cat might have knocked over a Lion's beer or a Lion slept with a Cat's missus. Who knows why the hate started, but the hate remains as relevant to the town as ever and football was the only way it could be embodied.

Sam was glad at least that the last game would be a great one.

The front gate to Sam's home had fallen off the hinge again and was creaking like a squealing little girl as it swung from side to side. Sam stops to fix it knowing no one else in the house would.

Sam's mother is in the kitchen, smoking and trying to complete a crossword in yesterday's paper.

'Sam! Finally you're home. Mexican food, 4 letters. Has a 'C' in it.'

'Taco.' Sam replies, ashamed that 'taco' was something that was not known in their home.

'Bloody Mexicans' Sam's mother mutters as she fills in the boxes. 'This is an Aussie paper, why would they put this rubbish in the crossword!'

'I don't know, Colleen.' It had been this for the last few years. Sam was never allowed to use the word 'mum' around any of her boyfriends and they are now frequent enough that 'Colleen' is the norm.

Sam heads for the shower, ignoring the racism in Colleen's remark and her lack of understanding and acceptance.

The water that streams down from the rusty showerhead is ice cold and Sam feels it working its magic on the muscles that had taken a beating. There are no signs of bruises yet, the damage feels mostly contained to internal organs.

Thankfully the jumper would cover any that appeared overnight and hide any sign of weakness to the opposition.

It feels like only five minutes had passed in the relaxing flow of falling water and lost in the rhythm, Sam is brought back to reality.

‘Sam!’ Colleen pounds at the bathroom door. ‘What are you doing in there! We’re in the middle of a drought! You can’t have a twenty-five minute shower! You can pay the bloody water bill this month if you keep this up!’

Sam turns the water off immediately, embarrassed to think what Colleen must be imagining happened in those long showers. Surely she realises it is all reparative, restorative. An athlete needs long cold showers after training, there is no adolescent self-discovery going on. But Colleen probably didn’t care about that, just the water bill.

The smell of sausages came from the kitchen and Sam pulls on the team hoodie and some footy shorts to eat. Colleen is not known for her culinary skills. Sausages in bread with tomato sauce scarcely constituted a meal but Sam is starving after such an intense training session and scrapes the plate clean.

Sam thinks about the rest of the team, how their mothers are probably whipping up a big batch of pasta to help their kids carbo-load in preparation for the game, and will make them big breakfasts of eggs and fresh juice and say good luck with a kiss on the cheek. Sam will be lucky if the milk isn’t off in the morning.

The ‘meal’ Colleen prepared will probably make Sam feel bloated and lethargic from whatever meat makes it into sausages these days. But like the coach said, Sam will have to push through it and keep up with the pace of the game.

‘If you can get up and back into the pack faster you’ll be an unstoppable defender one day.’ Martin’s compliment is still ringing in Sam’s ears. It will be the main source of motivation tomorrow.

After dinner Sam watches some TV, not engaging with the blurred images on their old TV set but mind focusing purely on the game.

On top of the TV set is a pile of envelopes. Mail from assorted relatives from around the country. Birthday cards waiting to be opened on Sunday morning, the day after the game. Sam’s sixteenth birthday.

Sam sighs. They are most likely filled with a few dollars to buy much-needed new footy boots, the irony was clear that after Saturday they wouldn’t be needed.

At ten o’clock Sam goes to bed to rest up.

It seems impossible when the alarm goes off at seven the next morning. Sam hasn’t slept much, plagued with dreams of being knocked over so hard and not being able to get up, of losing the match by only a point.

Colleen is asleep on the couch when Sam enters the kitchen hoping for something decent for breakfast. The TV is still on. Sam turns it off and looks at her lying on the couch, she appears like a stranger to Sam in her sleep.

Sam is thankful that there is bread for toast with only a little bit of mould in the corner that can easily be scraped off. No milk.

Eating alone, thinking about who will be the main opponent that needs the most attention, Sam runs through the names.

Joel Hamish is the key forward that the East Lions spend the most time training to defend against, but someone else will pick him up. Sam didn’t have the height. Joel is an intimidating boy though, he doesn’t care who he collects along the way to scoring a goal, even if it is Sam.

But Sam expects to be treated like everyone else on the team. No special treatment, all the team are equal – but this being Sam’s last game made that not quite true anymore.

Sam gets ready for the game as Colleen stirs on the couch.

‘What time’s ya game love?’

‘10.30am – are you coming?’

‘I’ll try kiddo.’

With the sun is already out and blistering, Sam sets off for the walk down to the football oval. The game was going to be unforgiving in this heat. Sam prays that the under 11 kids who run out the water are ready for a big day.

Sam is the first to arrive. The rest of team won't be far away and it is the perfect chance to embrace all that was about to be left behind. The game, the atmosphere, the smell of Deep Heat wafting through the clubrooms, assaulting the senses but comforting them at the same time.

The oval and its crumbling stands that don't stop the fans from cramming into them to cheer on their team, there will be a lot of them today to see the hated Cats go down. The sense of belonging. Sam belongs here at this place, feels accepted, feels that the game is natural, that the hard work and training are rewarding, that on game day – there is no better feeling than running out with a team and fighting together to win.

It isn't fair. Sam doesn't want to give this up.

Sam runs a few laps to get warmed up before the rest of the team arrive. It is such a freeing feeling, running on an empty oval. Sam soaks it in. This is it, the end.

The team arrives one by one and Sam enters the change rooms after allowing time for the rest of the team to change.

Everyone is pumped up and raring to go. There is a team photo of the Cats taped to a wall in the rooms and someone has blacked out all the teeth, and drawn boobs on them.

'Sorry Sam,' Riley catches Sam's eyes on the picture. 'John did it, it's just a joke.'

'Yeah, no worries.' Sam replies erasing the image to focus back on the game.

They start a handball drill in the confined space and duck around the obstacles of bags and pillars and proud fathers who are watching their sons, talking to each other about how special each of their kids is and how one day they will make it.

Sam is in the zone, trying to block everything out and concentrate on the drill.

'Fast hands! Fast hands!' Martin bellows and the drill intensifies.

'Don't drop! Don't drop!' Sam's mind screams over the coach's voice.

'All right, enough of the small stuff. We'll head out to the oval to start warming up properly. Just every one know that once we are outside these doors, we have game faces on. We are the Lions! Let's go show these Cats why the Lions are the kings of the jungle!'

The team erupts into cheers and runs out to the ground, some bouncing footballs, some sidestepping to get the blood flowing through their thighs. Sam is right behind them when the coach steps in.

'Sam, how are you feeling today?' Martin asks softly, a complete change of tone from his uplifting speech seconds before.

'Yeah, I'm fine.' Sam replies.

'I just wanted to say that you're a great young player, I think you're better than half the blokes out there and if it were up to me, I'd keep you on – I think you could handle it.'

'Umm, thanks.'

'I mean it, but that's the rules I guess. Once you're sixteen you can't play with the boys anymore, they think you'll get hurt.'

'I know, it's fine.' Sam looks away at the wall.

'Anyway, there's a girls league a few hours away, I asked them to send you some registration forms. Maybe your mum can drive you over on weekends.'

'Thanks.'

'Well, go give them hell Samantha.'

