

Corner Kick

A novel

By Bill Swan

**Michael has everything, including soccer skills that others can
only dream of. Then a new boy arrives at the school and
threatens to put him on the sidelines.**

Chapter One

Soccer season begins

Michael Strike could see fear in the goalie's eyes.

The soccer ball was close to his feet, under his control.

Nobody could take him now. He shuffled to the left, deking the lone defender out of position. He caught the rolling ball with the inside of his right foot and shifted back to the right.

The fullback tripped trying to reverse direction. Michael dribbled into the clear, with only six metres and one frightened goalie between him and the goal.

“Let ’er go, Mike!” yelled Brandon Sales, his right wing forward. “Bulge that twine!”

Michael edged forward keeping the ball close to his feet. Bulging the twine would be a good trick. They were playing on the hard-packed grassless school playground. The metal frame of the goal was regulation size, but had no netting. ‘Bulging the twine’ as Brandon urged would be impossible. Michael smiled at the thought.

Behind the goal the playground fell away down the long slope into the park.

The goalie froze for a moment. Instead of moving to cut the angle, she retreated. She stumbled half a step backward, stopped to look left and right to find the goal posts, and retreated one more step until she stood on the goal line. Or where the goal line would have been had one been marked.

“Boot it, Strike!” Brandon yelled again.

Michael smirked, ragged the ball from foot to foot, and shuffled forward. He brought his right foot down hard on the edge

of the ball. The ball bobbed up from the ground, rising almost knee high. Michael brought his right foot around, winding up for a heavy kick.

The goalie winced once and stumbled backwards, covering her face. Michael faked the kick, brought his foot back into position before gently tipping the ball over the goal line with the outside of his little right toe.

“All right!” said Brandon, pumping his fist to the sky.

“You all right, Erika?” asked Michael. The goalie got to her feet. She brushed dirt from her jeans.

“I thought you were going to drill it at me!” she said.

Michael laughed. “Somebody would have had to chase the ball. That would waste good practice time. I wouldn’t want to wear the team out.”

“You might not have scored,” said Brandon. “You might have hit Erika by accident. Boy, did she look scared!”

Erika brushed needlessly at her shirt sleeves. “Okay, Mr. Smart Guy, you stand here and let Michael drill one at you. We’ll see how many you’ll catch and how brave your front teeth are.”

Brandon said nothing.

Miriah Bushra rushed up from mid-field. “So what is this? Are we all going to stand around and admire the super-star?” Miriah had shoulder-length brown hair, blue eyes that sparkled, and nerve that even Michael envied.

“Fetch the ball,” Michael replied. The ball had rolled only a couple of metres past the goal.

“Fetch yourself, Fido,” Miriah replied. “You’re a team member like everybody else, not visiting royalty.”

“Yeah, but he’s the best bet Tarcisio Parisotto Elementary School has of winning a soccer game this year,” replied Brandon. He pronounced the school name with some exaggeration: “Tar-Chees-yo Par-i-zot-oh El-e-men-tar-ee.”

“Game? We’re after the championship this year,” said Erika.

Miriah shook her head so her hair cascaded from side to side. “As long as Mr. SuperStar doesn’t strain himself,” she said. “We wouldn’t want to ruin his soccer season for something as silly as a championship.”

“If I thought I’d get hurt playing with this bunch,” Michael said mainly to Miriah, “then I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t risk my whole soccer season for any *school*.”

From the middle of the field, Ms Wright blew a long, shrill blast on her whistle. This was the signal for everyone to gather in the centre of the field. The practice was about to begin.

Michael excelled at everything. He wore the coolest clothes, watched the best movies, played only the most recent games – if a new version came out his mother was first in line at the arcade to buy it. He did as well in school as he wanted to do, which was high ‘B’s’. High enough to satisfy parents and teachers and not so high that other kids resented him. He was popular in school. His grade seven classmates were suitably impressed when his father drove up to pick him up one day in his brand new bright

yellow Hummer, a vehicle large enough to push a school bus if need be.

But surprisingly, what really caught Miriah Bushra's attention was the day that spring when his picture appeared in the local newspaper. He had scored the winning goal to help win the Inter-City provincial championship for the Oshawa Kicks under indoor soccer team.

That had made him overnight into a school hero. When tryouts for the school soccer team were announced, his classmates asked him to play and Miriah's voice was loudest.

Michael had shown reluctance at first, but Miriah had persisted. . It was the first time she had paid any attention to him. She had gazed at him without blinking, with her eyes so blue everyone mistakenly thought she wore contacts, and said, "Michael, the team needs you."

She paused, still unblinking, and said:

"The school needs you."

Miriah had never before shown she knew Michael was a classmate. Had he been a hockey hero, Miriah would not likely have noticed. She had loudly proclaimed to the class one day that she thought hockey to be a brutal, sluggish game fit for Neanderthals. She had made the comment, she told someone later, (who told someone who told someone until everyone knew) to deflate Kyle McIntyre, who played hockey and at the time had a crush on Miriah.

Miriah had a world vision. She preferred European bands, foreign movies that no one could understand, and of all things, ballet, mainly because her parents hated it. Someone once told her that soccer was the world's most popular game so she became a soccer fan.

“Are you playing?” he had asked Miriah.

“But I . . .don't . . . :” She blushed, and dropped her eyes.

Michael had never seen her flustered before.

“We could be teammates then.”

Miriah gave him a funny glance, followed by a faint smile. But that afternoon she was one of eleven, including Michael, -- exactly the number needed for the team -- to turn out for soccer practice that afternoon. The May air was still chilly, and the line of maple trees around the schoolyard and park next door had not yet filled out their leaves to fit in the green patchwork of an Oshawa spring.

“Thanks for coming,” Ms. Wright said when the group had ceased most of their shuffling. “We’re going to have a lot of fun this year.” They were a mixed group: some Grade sixes, mostly seven and eights, although two energetic fifth graders bounced on the spot.

The practice took place in the school yard behind the portables. Soccer goals sat at either end of the hard-packed dirt field. One side of the field ran downhill to a baseball diamond in the park next door.

“Can we win some games, too?” asked Erika, shaking her pony tail. “Last year we had lots of fun but we got creamed a lot.”

“Yeah, who enjoys that?” Kyle added. He had red hair that kept falling over his eyes.

“Well, last year was our first year with a team,” said Ms Wright. “And my first year as a coach. We all learned a lot. We’ll do better this year.”

Brandon Sales, with his short, dark-brown hair and preppie smile, bounced a soccer ball off his foot. “Well, this year we got Mike Strike playing for us. Mike’ll eat up those other teams. He plays on the Oshawa Kicks.”

“We all know that,” said Miriah, her voice haughty.

“It’s Michael,” Michael said, firmly.

“He’ll cream everybody,” said Justin Little, one of the two grade five students who had turned out. “Nobody kin stop him!”

There were nods and grumbles of agreement, enough that Michael blushed ever so slightly.

“Gee, can I have your autograph?” asked Miriah, with a shake of her head. But it was a friendly smile she gave him after other eyes had turned away.

“All right, all right, everybody,” said Ms. Wright. “That’s enough. We’re glad to have Michael on the team this year.

Welcome, Michael.”

Michael dropped his eyes for a moment. He enjoyed being noticed, the centre of attention but did not feel comfortable with it.

“Provincial champions,” said Brandon. “Mike’s team won the Kingston tourney, the Kitchener tourney, the Windsor tourney, the . . .”

“We get the idea,” said Miriah, scornfully. “He’s a Super Star.”

“And the indoor league championship this past winter, and a whole bunch of indoor tourneys, and . . .”

“We said okay, enough,” said Miriah. “What are you, his press agent? Cheesh.”

“If you can do it, it’s not boasting,” replied Brandon. “And Mike’s done it.”

Michael turned to Brandon. “It’s Michael,” he said, again, quietly.

He recalled his first day that past September. Mr. Rahilly had called him Mike – a name he disliked. When he had tried to correct him his voice had squeaked out a mouse-like “Michael” and the class had laughed. He had never been laughed at before and he did not want to be laughed at ever again.

“Thank you, Brandon. That’s quite enough,” said Ms. Wright. She turned her coach’s eyes to the clip board she cradled in her left arm. “I have your names now. Michael, Miriah, Erika, Brandon. . .” She read off the list of players, her voice almost drowned in the May breeze. “. . . Justin, Alysha, Kyle, and Victoria.”

The breeze swept the names away. In the short pause that followed, Michael ran his eyes along the pattern of brick work on the school wall, each brick lapping the one above and below. He was fascinated at the way things like the bricks fit together to create something no individual brick could imagine.

“Soccer is a team sport,” said Ms. Wright. “That means every one of you must do the job you are assigned. That job will depend on the position you play.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” mumbled Brandon.

“You have something to say, Brandon?” asked Ms. Wright.

“No. Well, yeah. You say this every year.”

“Brandon, this is only the second year I’ve coached the soccer team. If I said this last year, too, maybe it’s because this is important.”

A few players giggled. Brandon scowled.

“Now listen, all of you. This is important and I’m only going to say it once.” The players quieted. Even Justin stopped bouncing.

“This is co-ed soccer – the boys and girls play together. Because Parisotto Elementary is small, we can field only one team. You’ll be playing against schools that field an entire team of Intermediates.”

“What’s that?” asked Justin.

“Players older and bigger than you, Squirt,” said Kyle, who was six feet tall.

“Intermediates are Grade Seven and Eights,” said the coach. “We don’t have enough students to field an entire team of Intermediates. In fact, we just have enough players for a team with nothing to spare. So if we’re going to play soccer, we need every one of you.”

“Like me,” said Justin. His short blond brush cut was flipped back at the front. His blue eyes sparkled as though he had just done something he should not have.

Erika adjusted her sweat band.

“Is that why they’re going to close the school?” she asked. “My parents say this is the last year. The board’s going to close it.”

Ms. Wright stopped and looked at her. Michael could see her look one at a time at the other students. Everyone stared at the ground.

“Enrolment at this school is small,” she said. “And yes, the school board has included Tracisio Parisotto Elementary in a list of schools to be considered for closing.”

“That means they’re going to close us,” said Erika.

“No decision has been made,” said Ms. Wright. “And it’s not going to have any to do with soccer season. We have only six weeks until school’s out. The first game is next week.”

“Next week?” Alysha said.

“Wait until I’m done. Yes, next week. After the league games, the top four teams go into the playoffs. The winners of the first round play for the district championship.”

“But if they close our school we’ll have to go to Pines next year.”

“That’s not our worry now. Soccer, Erika. Think soccer. We don’t have time to make mistakes. The only way to make sure we’re going to the playoffs is to win games.”

Michael listened. He felt anger filling his head until he was sure he looked like a blowfish. The board couldn’t do that, could

they? Make them all start a new school in the eighth grade? His parents would straighten that out, he was sure.

“We got creamed a lot last year,” said Erika. “Because we’re a small school.”

“You’ve said that, Erika,” said Ms Wright. “And we’re still a small school. But I want every one of you to think of winning.”

“Make it to the playoffs,” added Miriah, as though that were a strange concept.

“That’s right.” Ms. Wright paused for a moment. “One more thing is just as important,” she said.

“More important than winning?” asked Erika.

“Just this. I want each of you to repeat this three times. Are you ready?”

The team members exchanged glances and nodded to Ms. Wright.

“Repeat this: ‘My game is fair play’,” she said. “Three times. Ready?” She waved her hands as though conducting a choir:

“My game is fair play,

“My game is fair play,

“My game is fair play.”

“So what’s it mean?” Ms Wright asked Justin.

The small boy beamed. “We don’t kick the ball out of bounds. We keep it in fair.”

“That’s baseball, Twirp,” said Kyle.

Victoria gave Kyle’s arm a playful cuff. “It means we play fair with the other team and with each other,” she said. She was dressed in a dungaree jacket and jeans with a green grass stain on the knee.

“Yeah, right,” Michael whispered, mostly to himself.

“And then we win the championship,” said Brandon.

“Yeah, smarty, how do we do that?” asked Erika.

“We just give the ball to Michael and let him score,” said Brandon, who laughed loudly at his own joke.

“Some team,” said Miriah.

“Not yet,” said Ms. Wright. “But it will be. Every one will have an opportunity to play. Every one must play. Where the team needs you is more important than the position you like to play.”

“Centre forward,” said Michael, emphatically.

“Right forward,” said Brandon, as though he, too, hadn’t heard.

“Goal,” said Erika.

“We’ll determine that as we go along,” said Ms. Wright.

“As coach, I will decide who plays what position, and who goes on the field and when. No back talk. Are we clear?”

Brandon mumbled.

“Okay. Everybody on the goal line. Roll out all the balls. Right. For this drill, I want to see everybody up the field and back again. There are, how many? Eleven? We have six soccer balls. So what’s that going to mean?”

“We share?” asked Victoria.

“You got it. Ready?”

The spring air was pierced by the shrill whistle. The team set off, kicking the soccer balls ahead, passing, shouting, dribbling. Down the field and back again they ran, arriving back at the goal line where they started, some panting, all laughing. No one was surprised that Michael was the only one without a partner and finished first.

“That was good,” said Ms. Wright. “Now do it again. Kyle, can you work with Justin for a bit?”

“Do I have to? I mean, why do we got to have these little kids on the team? They can’t do nothing right.”

“Kyle, Justin needs some help on taking a pass. Your assignment is to help him. We don’t have any bench strength, so we need everybody.”

“Do I have to? Me and Brandon . . .”

“Don’t whine. Just do it.”

School soccer season had begun.