

KICK 4 MALAWI

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For more information about the work of Kick4Life please visit www.kick4life.org

KICK 4 MALAWI

For Mum and Dad

CHAPTER 1 THE BULLY AND THE BEEF

I didn't hear the knock. He just came in and placed a hot cup of tea on the bed-side table. "Come on Digger, it's time. I want you up and downstairs in 10 minutes!"

I glanced sleepily at the borrowed alarm clock. It read 5:45. It was early, even for him, and for a brief moment thoughts of mutiny sailed through the murky waters of my semi-conscious mind.

"It's a Saturday morning...just a few more minutes...hours even..." I murmured. But no, like Pavlov's dog, some well-rehearsed mechanism kicked into gear to bypass my better judgement, and I got out of bed and began to dress.

This routine had become a familiar feature of my visits to the Fleming household. Even when we were kids and I was staying for a sleep over, Steve was guaranteed to get me up at some unearthly hour. Whether it was to scavenge food from his parents' larder for an illicit midnight feast, or to scramble the garden fence to wilfully trespass on the college grounds behind his house, Steve was an early bird, and on countless occasions I felt rather like the dozy worm, caught napping and pulled reluctantly from my sleep to join him on some crazy adventure or another. And now it was happening again. My mind wandered back to those times in our teenage years when Steve's excuses for

interrupting my sleep had become more cerebral. The alarm would go off at six and I would be dragged protesting into a cold and dewy morning to catch a fish in the lake or to hear the dawn chorus on Southampton Common.

This pattern of sleep deprivation whilst visiting my friend had continued well into adulthood. There was always some scheme on the go, some windmill to be tilted, some plan of action brewing in the furtive recesses of the Fleming mind that required an early start. Yep, I had to hand it to him - Stephen Fleming definitely had “Get Up and Go”. Sometimes it felt like all I had was “Lie in and Stay.”

Now I was a 28-year-old secondary school teacher, and it was happening again. The venue had changed with the years, but I still felt like that same 10-year-old boy being cajoled into the morning by his excitable but slightly bullying best mate.

But secretly, if I’m honest, I guess I actually like *being* up early, it’s the *getting* up part that I have problems with. You see, it seems I have a lazy default, and left to my own devices an early start at the weekend is very definitely out of the question. I need a conduit, a *raison d’etre*, a kick up the backside, and every now and again Steve has been on hand to provide it. And, it must be said, I have been largely grateful for it over the years.

In 1998 I spent a month travelling the capital cities of Europe like a restless hobo. In 2001 I experienced the Bull-running Fiesta of San-Fermin in Pamplona and in the same year I ran the Great North Run for Cancer Research. It’s fair to say I would not have achieved any of these things had it not been for Steve’s trusty right boot up the backside. He was the architect and instigator of many adventures that I am now proud to have embarked upon. True, at the time they seemed like hellish feats of physical endurance. But anyway, they all began with an early start.

If I got a healthy shove out of my comfort zone once in a while, I was never quite sure what Steve got out of the bargain.

Companionship I suppose. Steve could always count on me to be stupid enough to accompany him on his little expeditions. After all, I had always put up very feeble resistance in the past. And here I was capitulating at the first instance yet again. I didn't even know what he had planned for us to do at a quarter to six on an August morning.

I hadn't visited Steve's home in St Neots for almost a year. I was having a particularly uneventful summer and Steve had suggested a get-together to cheer me up and give me something to do. So I travelled up from Southampton and we spent the evening reminiscing over a few beers while we watched the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics on TV. As I trudged upstairs to the spare room, Steve mentioned something about getting up early for a walk, but I pretended not to hear and went to bed. Now, just five hours later I was tippy-toeing back down those same stairs so as not to wake Steve's wife Claire. She could always say no.

Steve shoved a croissant into my hand as he shut his front door and within minutes we were setting a fast-paced march across the fields that spread from the back of his house towards the river Ouse. "We're going to walk a stretch of the Great Ouse Way" he announced matter-of-factly.

"Okay" I yawned, letting the fresh morning air massage my brain into gear. "It'll be good exercise for my knee. I dislocated it a month ago playing football and my doctor said I need to do some physio to strengthen the tendons."

"Well we'll just take it easy then" said Steve "Tell me if it begins to hurt."

It was unlike Steve to take such a sympathetic interest in my physical welfare. I became suspicious.

"So where exactly are we going then?"

“Well, we’ll just head into St Neots then follow the river for a while. See where it takes us. I’ve packed us some food. Don’t worry about the rucksack, I’ll carry it.” There was definitely something not quite right.

We reached the river and followed its path through some woodland to a campsite on the edge of the small market town. It hadn’t taken us long. Despite Steve’s assurances, this was not just a leisurely stroll. “Taking it easy” was not a phrase that held any real meaning for Steve. Whatever he did, he always did it fast, and my competitive streak made sure we were soon both walking as though imaginary dogs were snapping at our heels. To my surprise there was no pain from my knee and it felt good to be outside doing something active at a time of the morning when I would ordinarily be sleeping.

As we passed St Neots and headed into the valley plain of the Great Ouse, a heavy morning mist rose from the boggy fields to our left. It had been a wet and cold summer and the river-side path was muddy and uneven. I gingerly sidestepped each puddle, conscious of my weak knee. As the sun began to climb above the slow moving river, the air became infested with midges that nipped and buzzed around our faces. The irritation of the flies was matched by the growing heat of the sun on our necks and before long I handed my sweater to Steve to put inside the rucksack – the first declaration that I was beginning to feel the pressure of his fast pace. We headed on in near silence for the next half hour, passing the odd dog-walker and disturbing countless ducks nestling in the riverbank that shot out from the reeds and splashed into the green water as we tramped by.

I began to get a little agitated. It seemed like a fairly aimless walk, but then I suppose all walks are aimless if you are not headed anywhere in particular. I had never been a great fan of walking. Every other week I went home for Sunday lunch and my mother, fresh from cooking and eating an enormous roast dinner, would utter the improbable words: “Anyone going to join

me for a walk?" It seemed like a strange proposal every time, and was steadfastly met with universal apathy from the other members of my family, who, stuffed, contented, and resolutely male, could barely manage to extend an arm to pick up the remote and flick to Sky Sports. Fair play to Mum though, she always asked.

Now despite the enjoyment to be had from being outdoors on a pleasant summer's morning, an hour of trudging by the river and getting eaten alive by the midges was rending the walk tedious. I ventured to start a conversation, but during our prolonged silence my mind had wandered (as it usually did) back to the well worn topic of my complicated love-life. As I opened my mouth and began to ruminate over my latest romantic failure, even I felt immediately sick of my own voice. Why did I have to analyse everything?

"Why do you have to analyse everything?" asked Steve with a mocking glance over the shoulder. "Stop talking about it. You spend so much time worrying about being on your own; you're not enjoying your life."

Suitably chastised I stopped talking. Steve had been married for nearly four years and in that time he'd had to listen to one sob story after another about my girlfriends or lack of them. And with every tale of woe came the self-analytical drivel of a lonely, slightly paranoid single man approaching his thirties. He was now well beyond being sympathetic; he was totally fed up with hearing about it.

"What you need my friend, is a challenge; something to take your mind off women for a change." It was now 7.45. We had been walking non stop for about an hour and a half. We sat down on a concrete jetty next to the tow-path and Steve, glancing at his map, calculated that we had walked about 6 miles. "We're half way to Godmanchester" he announced. "We've made pretty good progress."

"Half-way? When are we going to turn back?!"

“We’re not going to turn back, Digger!”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to walk a marathon – 26 miles, and I’ve arranged for Claire’s Dad to pick us up and bring us home.”

This unexpected news, although it came as a shock, actually lifted my spirits. The walk was no longer a pointless exercise; we now had a goal – a challenge! We had always been a geeky pair during our teenage years. We’d had collections, hobbies, interests. It made me smile just how little we had changed over the years. We were still embarking on treasure hunts in our blue cagoules.

“You little tinker!” I smiled at Steve. “How long have you had this planned?”

“Ever since you rang me up and complained you were bored. Now take a swig of your Ribena and finish your Kit-Kat, we need to be in Godmanchester by nine o’clock for breakfast!”

Godmanchester is 13 miles to the north-east of St Neots, and we were planning on being there before breakfast. The challenge seemed surmountable given that we were already quarter of the way there. I felt confident it would be both a proverbial and literal “walk in the park.” My knee felt fine, my legs were fresh, and the day was going to be warm and dry. But those things were about to change.

As we approached the small town of Godmanchester we had to negotiate several waterlogged fields, and by the time we stopped for breakfast we were soaked to the knees. As we sat down on a park bench satisfied by our extra-ordinary progress, we were unaware that our drenched jeans were chilling our tired and contracting muscles. We had walked thirteen miles before 9.30 in the morning across spongy and uneven ground, and that just had to do some damage. When we got up to start the second half of the walk, I felt a crippling pain shoot through my calves and hamstrings. It was very obvious as we rejoined the Great

Ouse Way that the next thirteen miles would be an incredible test of endurance.

The river wound its way east past Huntingdon and on to St Ives. The five miles we had travelled since breakfast had taken us nearly two hours to complete and we had followed the river at each turn, often trudging across muddy fields and losing the path altogether. Steve had arranged for his father-in-law John to pick us up at three o'clock, and we were in danger of falling behind schedule. That was unthinkable. Steve was never late. Incredibly, we decided to run the 18th mile of the trip. It was actually a relief. In pain though we were, running used slightly different muscles and the blisters developing on my heels no longer rubbed when I transferred my weight onto the balls of my feet.

At St. Ives we marched straight through the town centre and managed to find a dry spot next to the river to collapse and have lunch. I peeled off my wet socks and peered tentatively at my feet. They were in a bad way, and my calves burnt like hell, but we were nearly there. We promised ourselves a couple of pints at a pub we would pass near Bluntisham, and by the time we got there, I could barely stand upright to order my Guinness. By now our conversation had turned inevitably to just how much physical pain we were in. Did it compare to the time we chose to climb Mount Harder Kulm in Switzerland after travelling for three weeks without a proper bed to sleep in? Or perhaps the time Steve had played four games of football in 24 hours? There could be no doubt for me. I had dislocated my knee only a few weeks earlier and I could still remember writhing uncontrollably on the ground, saturated in agony. Now the pain throbbing in my leg muscles was comparable to that ordeal. Why on earth were we doing this?

By half past two in the afternoon we were approaching the last stretch of the walk, or should I say hobble, for I was in so much pain that every step delivered a shot direct to the back of my knees. My tendons had taken such a battering I could no longer

fully extend my legs. I felt like a grasshopper as I half-jumped with every step to keep my momentum going. And there were other forms of wildlife getting in the way. Just as we approached the 26-mile-mark which was the church spire of St Mary's Church in the small village of Earith, the path was blocked by a herd of cattle.

"What are we going to do?" I whinged. We could see the road where Steve's Father-in-law was due to pick us up. I was even beginning to smell the Radox. But there were now several irate looking cows coming our way. With grim determination, and focusing on the impending ecstasy of a hot bath, we tip-toed around them gingerly, narrowly avoiding a stampede. I yelled with each tortured hop as if walking across hot coals. We had to laugh. Neither of us had any idea that walking a cross-country marathon would be so painful. We were under no illusions now though. Even Steve was beginning to tire and with the finish line in sight I turned to him with a hint of bitterness behind my grimace.

"Remind me why we are doing this?" I complained.

"We're doing it because you were bored and in need of a challenge, and because we need to start training."

"Training for what?" I enquired.

"We're going to kick a football across Malawi!"

CHAPTER 2 **WHY MALAWI?**

Ducking under the soothing warm water I stretched out my weary limbs. I was in heaven. The pain behind my knees was temporarily relieved and my mind began to wander back to the conversation I'd had with Steve on the journey home from Earith.

Steve had always been a self-contained man, and by his own admission not one given to easy displays of emotion. We'd been the best of friends since the age of seven and in all that time I had not once seen him cry. But for some reason, as we travelled the 26 miles back to St Neots and he began to explain the genesis of a new adventure, I could see the tears beginning to well in his eyes and a deeper, more vulnerable part of himself revealed for the first time.

Steve and Claire had been trying for a baby for two years without success, that much I knew, but I hadn't realised that after 18 months they had decided to seek help. The couple had begun IVF treatment at the Bourn Hall Clinic in Cambridge where Louise Brown, the first test tube baby was conceived in 1977. They were lucky that it was so close, just 20 miles down the road - they were soon to meet people who travelled hundreds of miles for every visit, and this could involve more than five trips in any one cycle.

The initial assessment had given them hope. At 26 and 27 they were young, much younger than most people who begin the

treatment. Even more importantly they couldn't find anything wrong with either Steve or Claire. The clinicians warned them that IVF was tough, that failure would be hard to take; a seemingly obvious point, but one they pressed home as they handed Claire the telephone number of a counsellor if things became too much. They also handed Steve a bill for £4,000.

The first round failed. They were both devastated, but Steve was more upset for Claire. She had put herself through so much, mentally and physically, to find her hopes dashed in the space of a thirty second telephone conversation.

Claire was open about her feelings throughout the experience. That's the type of person she is. Her friends and close family knew she was frightened, tired and desperate, but Steve had found it difficult to talk about his feelings. Instead he had simply gotten on with life and tried to pretend that there wasn't a problem. But there was, and he couldn't ignore it for long. There were constant reminders – the monthly cycle, daily tablets and injections, friends and relatives announcing their pregnancies. What was more, for her own sanity, Claire *needed* to talk about it, a lot, and so, perhaps for the first time in his life Steve found himself trapped in a seemingly never-ending cycle of hope and disappointment.

With so much playing on his mind he had started to search for an escape, something he could focus on when he was on his own that would help him forget what was happening, at least for a while. At first Steve turned to his career. He was working as a marketing executive and began putting extra hours in at the office, but after a few weeks concluded it wasn't really working – he had lost his passion for the job a long time ago.

Next he started to read. Steve had always had a passion for books, but now he began to dive fervently into the pages of any novel he could get his hands on. In the space of a few months he'd read the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, Irving Stone's biographical novel of

Michelangelo, *Resistance* by Anita Shreve, and a couple of books from Bernard Cornwell's *Sharpe* series. It didn't work. Steve confessed he was feeling completely suffocated, and plunging into the depths of largely melancholic tales was doing him more harm than good. At a time when Claire needed him more than ever to be strong, he was becoming truly miserable for the first time in his life.

"Then, one evening, everything changed" said Steve, as we sped through the flat, Huntingdonshire countryside. "I was watching the nine o'clock news and they ran a feature on the AIDS crisis in Africa."

The images showed a group of young children playing football in a dusty courtyard. "Millions of children like these have been orphaned by the disease", said the reporter. Their clothes were dirty and torn, and their football, if you could call it that, consisted of a few carrier bags bunched together and tied with a piece of string. But, and it's a clichéd thing to say, they looked so happy, laughing and smiling as the camera followed them in pursuit of their makeshift toy. It immediately set Steve thinking about the way he had been behaving, and how easily he had let his problems get the better of him. As the report ended and the weather forecaster predicted rain in the morning, he decided there and then that instead of feeling sorry for himself, he would do something for somebody else.

With the epiphany ringing in his ears Steve started to explore options for doing a charity challenge, the type of thing you see advertised all over the place these days; Climb Kilimanjaro, Explore the Inca Trail, Cycle Cuba, raise £2750 for a good cause and have the experience of a lifetime. But typically, Steve wanted to hold the reigns. He wanted the freedom to do something a bit different, something that would capture people's imagination, and he also wanted to create a challenge that would be gruelling. Steve had always been pretty fit, I could vouch for that, but

approaching thirty, Steve wanted to recapture the super-fitness of his teenage years. More importantly, by setting himself a tough physical challenge, as well as a decent fundraising target, he would have plenty to keep himself occupied. And for Claire, she would have her husband back again.

And so it proved. As Steve buzzed with a new positive outlook, Claire felt they had both found a new hope for the future. With his wife's blessing, Steve looked around for further inspiration. There was Lloyd Scott who completed the London Marathon in an antique deep sea diving suit to raise money for leukaemia sufferers, and Stephen Gough 'the Naked Rambler' who walked in the nude from Land's End to John O'Groats in a rather ironic bid to celebrate the beauty of the human form. Neither appealed, but their uniqueness was along the right lines. He just needed an idea of his own.

Steve kept coming back to the news clip of the children playing football. Over the years, as both an avid player and supporter he'd seen how much football meant to people, so why not base the challenge around it? Maybe he could harness the game's popularity for a good cause. He returned to the drawing board, and after a few days came up with an idea that seemed perfect, both for its simplicity, and the impact he believed it could have. He would kick a football over a vast distance, from one symbolic point to another. Steve imagined passing the ball to the locals as he ran through towns and villages, children running along behind him like something out of a *Rocky* movie.

Steve trawled the record books and the Internet, certain he would find that a similar challenge had already been done, but incredibly he found nothing. The idea was unique. He called his brother and invited him to join the expedition. Four years younger than Steve, Pete Fleming was nearing the end of a master's degree that was focused on maximizing the performance of elite athletes. As a sports fanatic this was right up his street, and it was no surprise that he immediately signed up for the

challenge. It was great to have someone to share the adventure with, especially someone with his experience and enthusiasm. Pete had a certain way of making things happen, and he always did it with a smile on his face.

The two brothers arranged to meet and discuss practicalities. First on the agenda was the question of where the challenge would take place. Steve had originally thought that they could follow in the footsteps of the Naked Rambler, but at over 1000 miles, Land's End to John O'Groats would take too long. It would also mean kicking along main roads, something the British Transport Police might not be too pleased about. In fact the issue of kicking along roads seemed like a bit of problem. They could go cross-country, but the whole point of the challenge was that people would see them and be interested in what they were doing.

Once again, the news clip showed Steve the way forward. The brothers would take the challenge to a new dimension. They would take it to Africa. This would almost certainly overcome any problems with the roads. They might have to pay the occasional police bribe, but from what Steve knew about Africa, he imagined that traffic laws would be far from stringent. What was more, Africa conjured romantic thoughts; the wild landscape, the simmering heat, the unrivalled passion for football that embraced the continent. There was no turning back. The boys excitedly opened the Lonely Planet guide to select a suitable destination. It had to be somewhere that was relatively safe – the challenge would carry enough risks of its own without the danger of attack. With their limited language skills they also felt that a former British colony would make it easier to communicate what they were trying to do. Finally, the destination had to provide the challenge with a reason for being – a cause. It all pointed to one place. Malawi.

Malawi, a small slither of territory landlocked between Tanzania to the North, Zambia to the West, and Mozambique to

the South East, is known as the 'Warm Heart of Africa' because of the friendliness of its people. Malawi, with its population crazy about football, seemed like an ideal location. Most evident of all however, was the cause. "Malawi is being crippled by AIDS", read one article. "One in seven people are infected with the disease, leaving millions of children orphaned, and creating a cycle of poverty that is regularly plunged into famine when the harvest fails."

Steve searched more widely on the web and came across a project called Mission Malawi. It was the brainchild of a guy called Les Pratt, a BBC radio producer who, similarly moved by TV pictures, had organised a cycle ride from Lilongwe, the capital city, to an AIDS project in the north. Les and his team had raised more than £35,000, and he would later visit Steve's home and give him some invaluable tips for the challenge. Pete looked at the route Les had taken. It was 250 miles and he worked out that by covering a marathon each day, the brothers could complete the distance in ten days. It sounded like a pretty tough challenge. Neither of them had even tried kicking a football over a prolonged distance, let alone in extreme heat and over unpredictable terrain. But it felt right, and they decided to take it on.

A date was set for May 2005, and over the coming days the plan came together quickly. Steve and Pete would begin at the national stadium in Lilongwe and kick northwards, following the amusingly named M1 (part single-carriageway, part dirt track) aiming to finish at the St John's AIDS Project, an orphanage in the small city of Mzuzu. They set a fundraising target of £10,000, having no real concept of how realistic this was, and contacted Action Aid, a charity that supported the project. They were keen to help raise as much money, and generate as much media coverage as possible. Steve's charity challenge was born.

As we approached St Neots I looked at Steve dumbfounded. “I can’t believe you’ve done all this!” I stammered, temporarily forgetting the pain in my legs. What I really wanted to say was “I can’t believe you’ve done all this *without telling me*.”

“Well that’s why I invited you to stay” said Steve, uncannily interrupting my thought process. “Before taking things any further, Pete and I agreed that one vital ingredient was missing from our plans: Digger!” He smiled broadly. “So, are you on board?”

There was never a thought in my mind to reject the proposal, but something in me needed convincing. I paused momentarily to let Steve paint me a picture.

“Nobody has ever done it before! Think about it – the sun setting on the savannah, wild animals calling in the distance as the heat rises all around. Two footballers locked in a battle with the elements for ten days! Come on Digger – what a challenge!”

“Ten days?” The blood began to drain from my face. “That’s ten back to back marathons! We’ve just done one and I can barely move.” My head began to swim. I was reasonably fit but I knew that this kind of a challenge was beyond me. “I’m not too sure I can do ten marathons Fleming.”

“Oh you’re not going to run it Digger! I’m going to do the challenge with Pete; you are coming along to write about it!”

I had a flashback of a previous adventure; a trip around Europe with the Fleming brothers in 1998. After three sleepless weeks of gruelling travel we had arrived at Interlaken, Switzerland and with true cavalier determination, Steve had decided to march us up a mountain the size of Ben Nevis. Five hours later we had returned from the summit and I flopped to the ground, semi-conscious with exhaustion. Pete was 17 at the time and had barely broken into a sweat.

Despite the reality of my own lack of stamina, I felt a little miffed that the decision to omit me from the challenge had already been made. I wasn't that lame was I? I changed my tune.

"Well, hold on a minute Steve," I complained. "I reckon I could give it a good go, after all, I walked 26 miles today with a dodgy knee and absolutely no training didn't I? Don't write me off just yet."

Steve looked me in the eye with a best friend's sincerity, "Digger, God has given us all different talents." He mused patronisingly. "He's blessed me and Pete with iron stamina. You on the other hand got wheezy last night watching the Olympics. I'm surprised I didn't kill you today. Do you remember the time the three of us did that 10k hike in Corfu? You kept falling behind demanding ice-lolly breaks. Pete and I had to keep waiting for you to catch up. This sort of challenge is going to take a hell of a lot of preparation. I'm going to be running about 10 miles every day just to get myself into shape. Can you really see yourself putting in that much training?"

Steve was right of course – I had to concede. I was never a great runner and would not have the physical stamina or mental determination to complete the challenge. I nodded in defeat.

"I'm not writing you off Digger," Steve continued, "I'm writing you on! You are great with words. That's your talent. Your particular challenge is to write about every stage of the project."

At that point we had arrived back at Steve's home. My mind was buzzing and I had completely forgotten about the pain in my legs. Steve held out his hand. "Are you in?"

"Of course I am" I replied, shaking Steve's hand with a grin. I opened the car door, took one step, and then crumpled to the pavement in agony. My legs no longer worked.

The bath was now growing cold and I could hear Steve hobbling impatiently outside the bathroom door waiting for his turn. I didn't want to move. I was scared that I wouldn't be able to. Getting into the bath had been a challenge in itself, now I had to reverse the manoeuvre and find out whether a 40 minute soak had revived my wooden legs. I could really have done with one of those contraptions you see advertised for the elderly; the ones that lower you in and out gently at the press of a button. Instead I was forced to grapple with the porcelain and flip myself over the side. I landed with a wet thud on the bathroom floor. My legs still didn't work.

I looked up at the ceiling and thought about Malawi. It sounded so exotic. I had to admit that I knew next to nothing about the country. I had never been to Africa and I found the prospect exciting yet daunting in equal measure. Just the word "Africa" conjured images of vast untamed landscapes, incredible wildlife and majestic sunsets, warm nights and sanguine people. But I was also aware of another Africa; one you don't always see in the David Attenborough documentaries; the flipside to the picture postcard idyll; the realities of poverty, starvation, disease and conflict. I wondered which Africa we would encounter.

Later Steve and I sat with a beer in his garden as the sun descended on a warm August evening. The tightness I could feel locking behind my knees and in my hamstrings would last for the next three weeks. The conversation turned to Malawi.

"The great thing about doing this in Malawi" said Steve "is that the country is crazy about football! It's their national game and kids play it in the streets with anything vaguely spherical. We could really capture people's imagination over there."

"Well it's definitely captured my imagination" I said as I downed the last of my beer. "All it needs now is a name".

Back home in Southampton I dug out an atlas and searched for Malawi. It was difficult to spot at first. A tiny country wedged between Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. Tiny by African standards anyway. Malawi is 118,484 square kilometres, making it comparable in size to England. 840km long and no-where more than 160km wide, its surface area is dominated by Lake Malawi, Africa's second largest body of water. It seemed so remote and unknown. I had heard of the country but did not know of anyone who'd actually been there. I decided to buy a travel guide and find out more, but even a guide to the country was hard to come by. Malawi seemed to be one of Africa's forgotten nations.

I researched further on the internet and found it to be among the poorest countries on earth. Life expectancy was less than 40 and 1 in 7 of its population were suffering from HIV or AIDS. Despite these horrendous statistics, the photographic evidence I discovered revealed a country of unparalleled natural beauty and a people determined to smile through their troubles. It seemed no wonder that Malawi was dubbed "The Warm Heart of Africa". All the travel blogs I came across described the population as friendly and welcoming, and its beauty as breathtaking. Even before discovering this for myself, I wondered why such a country could be so overlooked. My lack of knowledge made me apprehensive.

Over the phone I quizzed Steve on the dangers we were likely to encounter on the trip. "What about wild animals?" I asked, still thinking about those David Attenborough documentaries, "I'm not camping out anywhere with lions or hyenas roaming about!"

"We shouldn't be in too much danger" Steve assured me. "We'll stay in hotels and lodges along the route and hire a truck for the duration of the trip. In any case I think most of the animals will be confined to the nature reserves. The most dangerous creatures we're likely to encounter are rabid dogs!"

“Marvellous” I said, less than convinced, “What about the people?” My friend Caroline had recently returned from a trip working with orphans in Uganda where she was in constant danger of kidnap from rebel gangs in the north of the country. I wondered how politically stable Malawi was in comparison. “We could be sitting targets for gangs or robbers.”

“Moving and kicking targets actually Digger” was Steve’s sardonic reply, but he had done his research. Malawi had a relatively stable government, a multi-party democracy, and crime levels were low. In short, this made it an ideal country to embark on such a challenge; the needs were great and the risk factors were small.

So within two weeks Steve had booked our tickets and signed me up on the trip of a lifetime. On the 19th of May 2005, we would be travelling to the Warm Heart of Africa to kick a football 250 miles in ten days. It would be gruelling, it would be exciting, but in August 2004 it all seemed a long way off in the future. Nine months to be precise. Nine months for Steve and Pete to train for ten back-to-back marathons. Nine months to plan the logistics of the challenge. Nine months to find sponsorship and promotion, and crucially, nine months to raise ten thousand pounds. We weren’t running yet, but we had already embarked on a race against time.

I was with a group of friends at a Chinese restaurant in Southampton when Steve texted me his first idea for a name for the project. “How about we call it “Kick Malawi”?” I nearly choked on a prawn cracker.

“You can’t call it that!” I replied, “It’ll sound like we’re attacking them not helping them!” Five minutes later and Steve was back with a slight amendment. “Kick 4 Malawi” was born.

CHAPTER 3 **PROMO**

“They’re crazy” thought the Professor as he turned off his computer and took a swig of tea. He had just received an e-mail from a former student telling him about an incredible feat of human endurance; two brothers were preparing to kick a football 250 miles across Africa in just 10 days.

But the Professor was no stranger to physical challenges in Africa. His mind returned to the time thirty years ago when he had set the world record for running up Mount Kilimanjaro in a time that had never been bettered. He wished he could still do things like that now, but he had lived his life to the full and had no regrets. He thought back to the arid African landscape he had made his home, its expansive wilderness and magnificent creatures. He remembered too another of his world firsts. How whilst living in Kenya, in addition to running up mountains, he had become the first person to accurately time the speed of the world’s fastest land mammal.

In 1965 he had come across two tame cheetahs raised on a farm near his home in Nairobi and was intrigued to find out how fast they could run. He measured out a 200 metre track and coaxed the two animals to run by trailing a lump of meat from the back of his Landrover. He clocked average speeds of around 102kph but incredibly didn’t publish his results until 1997 when he discovered that no-one else had achieved such scientifically

reliable measurements. The results were published in the Journal of Zoology and became his most requested paper.

There was no doubt about it; Craig Sharp had led a particularly active and interesting life. He had moved to Kenya during the 1960's to practice as a veterinary surgeon, but changed career course into Sports Physiology on his return to the UK in 1971. Back in Britain he became an official Olympic coach, attending 4 Olympic Games between 1972 and 1988, and went on to co-found both the British Olympic Medical Centre and the Olympic Medal Institute. He was now Professor of Sports Science at Brunel University where Peter Fleming had just completed his Masters Degree. Pete had written to him asking for a quote he could use on the Kick 4 Malawi website and promotional literature he was working on for the challenge. The Professor was only too willing to oblige.

“Kicking a football over 250 miles in ten days in Malawi is a formidable challenge. It means covering a marathon distance every day for ten days, at a gait which is rendered uneven due to the need for kicking the ball. If each kick is roughly ten metres, to keep the ball under reasonable control, then over approximately 400,000 metres, that implies 40,000 kicks.

Even if they avoid the middle of the day, it will be hot - at times very hot. This will demand attention to water intake, some of which will have to be carried, which will add to the weight. Curious bystanders may well want a kick at the ball, which will be good interactive fun, but will add to the general effort and slow down progress.

Walking 250 miles in 10 days is feat enough - but kicking a football the whole time adds greatly to the effort, both physically and indeed mentally, and very careful attention will need to be paid by the kick-runners to their feet, right from the start.

The brothers have trained hard for this, as one would have to. I have won 54 mile events in Kenya, and set the fastest time up Kilimanjaro, so I know a wee bit about what they are going to do - and I would far rather do my events again than theirs!!! They might not watch football again for a wee

while! I wish them all possible success.” - Craig Sharp, Professor of Sports Science, Brunel University, founder of the British Olympic Medal Institute

Professor Sharp had given us a ringing endorsement we could use to promote the challenge and gain important sponsorship. Through another contact at University, Pete was also able to gain a quote from perhaps Britain’s greatest ever female athlete, Paula Radcliffe.

“Kick 4 Malawi is a very tough physical challenge and I admire Steve and Pete for taking it on. Raising money for children orphaned by AIDS in Africa is a great cause and I wish them every success.” - Paula Radcliffe

By September the Kick 4 Malawi website was complete and through several work contacts, Steve had managed to incorporate a few more celebrity endorsements. The cricketer Adam Benjamin, presenter Zilpah Hardy and actor Christian Solimeno from Footballers Wives had all sent messages of support. But there was one celebrity Steve and I admired so much, we were hoping against all hope that he might actually join us on the challenge. The comedian Tony Hawks had written several hilarious novels based around the author’s predilection for embarking on crazy challenges to win obscure bets. “Around Ireland with a Fridge”, and “One Hit Wonderland” had been huge best sellers and I had just finished reading “Playing the Moldovans at Tennis” which described how Tony had travelled to the Eastern European country of Moldova in a bid to play, and beat the entire Moldovan national football team... at tennis. It was a long shot, but we reckoned Tony might be up for taking part in our own particular brand of crazy challenge. Steve e-mailed him giving him the low-down on Kick 4 Malawi, and received the following reply;

“Dear Steve, thanks for your e-mail, it sounds like an amazing challenge, but unfortunately I have got too many projects on the go at the moment to be of any assistance. I wish you all the best with Kick 4 Malawi, Tony.”

Steve was disappointed that Tony wasn't going to be joining us on the trip. It now looked likely that I was to be the sole writer-stroke-comedian coming along and Steve was not confident in my ability to fulfil either of these roles.

"Digger, I know how lazy you are" said Steve one night over the phone. "I'm counting on you to finish this book and get it published as soon as possible. I want you to start writing at least 200 words per night." Steve was a harsh task master, and his constant nagging over the coming weeks forced me to begin tapping at my computer in a vain attempt to kick-start the book. But teaching and writing are very time consuming occupations and I soon found that during term time at least, it was the writing that got squeezed out of my busy schedule. As Christmas approached, I had still barely begun the task, but I was optimistic. There were still several months to go before we flew to Malawi, and after all, I couldn't realistically write a book about a challenge that had not yet happened.

Steve was less forgiving about my failure to get the book started. "I knew this would happen Digger", he said, fuming. "You need to be in a position to get the book finished within weeks of us returning from Malawi. I might even bring a laptop so you can write while we go along. If you can't do it, then I'm going to have to write the book myself."

Steve always had the ability to press the right buttons. Since the age of seven we'd been fiercely competitive as friends and over the years to my intense irritation I had found that there were very few things that I could do better than him. Writing and seeing were the obvious two (Steve's glasses were an inch thicker than mine). But he was better at football, more academically gifted, and most galling of all, better at pulling women. Now, faced with my one chance to shine a beam to match the aura of perfection that was Stephen John Fleming, the golden boy was preparing to snuff out my candle. Well no way! There was absolutely no way that Steve was going to be doing any writing

about his own adventure. Spurred into action, I attempted to finish the first chapter of my book. I failed miserably, and then lied to Steve about how much I'd written.

In the meantime, Steve was being rather more productive at sending sponsorship proposals to big businesses, but he realised that for the challenge to gather attention within footballing circles, he needed the support of the Football Association. Steve wrote a letter to the Head of International Relations at the FA, asking for official sponsorship. Although this was declined, the FA was prepared to offer us some football equipment to take with us on the trip.

The FA also put Steve in contact with the Football Association of Malawi who were more than happy to get involved. Despite the enthusiasm for the game among the people out there, Steve had learnt that FAM was an organisation in desperate need of funding and that the football league in Malawi was disorganised and ad-hoc. Games were played sporadically and the league was open to corruption and financial scandal. Steve decided to use the challenge to raise the profile of organised football in the country and to work with FAM to secure sponsorship and investment from abroad. He wasn't too sure about how he was going to achieve this, but he wove it into the project manifesto anyway. The mission statement read as follows;

Kick 4 Malawi is aiming to make an impact in a number of ways by;

- Joining the fight to **KICK OUT** Aids and poverty from Malawi, by raising funds for Action Aid, and raising awareness of the issues.
- Helping to **KICK START** Malawian football which suffers from a lack of investment.

- Working with a number of organisations to **KICK INTO ACTION** the role that football can play in fighting Aids.

These objectives were posted on the new website that the boys had constructed, which together with pictures and the celebrity endorsements we'd garnered, enabled people to sponsor the project directly on-line. Members of Steve's extended family were among the first to pledge money towards the challenge. But the Fleming clan were not only concerning themselves with raising money for the boys, many of them were eager to join us on the expedition. Steve's father-in-law was the first to sign up.

John McCarthy was resourceful and practical, the sort of man that might come in handy on a trip that could potentially go wrong in so many ways. Forthright in his views, he exuded the confidence of a self-made man, which combined with a mordant wit and eye for a put-down, made him a fairly imposing figure on first acquaintance. Having him as a father-in-law for the past five years had been both a trial and a reward for Steve. When setting up home with Claire, he had always felt John's protective eyes looking over his shoulder. He was an expert in the garden, a DIY enthusiast, knew how to rewire a house, could fix the guttering on his roof, and was an experienced mechanic. Steve was none of these things, and since his marriage to Claire in 2000, he'd felt an enormous pressure to suppress his aesthetic temperament and prove his practical worth.

Steve respected John's knowledge of DIY and business matters, but his own pride and competitive nature had driven him on to learn new skills and strive for an independence that would gain his new father-in-law's respect. Within three years he had bought and sold two houses, redecorated them and designed a garden complete with a patio and water feature. He was now something of an expert in stocks and shares and was even beginning to understand the rudiments of simple car repair. Steve

was starting to feel like a real grown-up. On most of the occasions when practical application was required, he had gone it alone and stubbornly refused to take on board John's well meaning advice, only to crawl back apologetically when his deficiencies were realised. Having such a knowledgeable father-in-law was intimidating but invaluable.

This time John had come to Steve, asking whether he could take part in the Malawi expedition. Despite his suspicions that Claire was sending her Dad along to keep an eye on him, Steve was pleased to have his pragmatic father-in-law on board and gave John the responsibility of hiring, driving and maintaining our 4x4 vehicle. We anticipated that this would be a crucial role as the possibility of overheating or a break-down seemed a near certainty and we didn't want to be stranded in the middle of the Africa without someone who knew a thing or two about cars. As things turned out, the role became redundant when we realised that hiring a professional guide to drive us would be a luxury we could just about afford, but having John with us as an all-round fixer, seemed like a wise decision. I for one, after experiencing Steve's lack of practical forethought on previous trips, felt much more relaxed knowing he was coming.

Next to express an interest in joining the project was Steve's own father, also called John. Nuclear physicist of the year in 2001, Professor John Fleming was an intelligent man with a long list of plaudits for his work in the field of nuclear medicine. But his self-effacing manner and quiet demeanour made him appear more like a humble librarian than a renowned scientist. Growing up, he and his wife Jean were like second parents to me. Their house was always buzzing with friends and family and they frequently opened their door to the poor and needy in their community, a kindness which reflected their quiet Christianity.

John was football mad, and the fact that his two sons were planning such a unique challenge filled him with a glowing pride and a determination to get involved. The brothers were thrilled

to have their Dad coming along with them. They had always enjoyed a close relationship and his calm exterior and talent for problem solving made him a welcome addition to the team. Initially Steve gave him the task of planning and booking our accommodation on the trip, but again the decision to use a tour guide in Malawi negated this role. Never-the-less, we now had two wise heads on the expedition, and I felt doubly secure in the knowledge that this was not going to be one of Steve's noble yet quixotic schemes. Kick 4 Malawi now had the Dads on board.

On September the 14th Steve was featured in his local newspaper, The Cambridge Evening News. It was a full page article with the headline "Steve's 250-mile goal to help AIDS orphans" and two large pictures of his wiry frame doing keepy-ups in the back garden. It read as follows;

"An extreme challenge is being carried out by a St Neots man to help the fight against the AIDS crisis in one of Africa's poorest countries. Steve Fleming will kick a football for more than 250 miles across Malawi in 10 days – a country where one in seven people live with HIV or AIDS.

He will be accompanied by his brother Pete from Southampton. On arrival at their final destination, they will present a cheque for the money raised to help care for children orphaned by the disease. The challenge will start on May 21 next year and coincide with the F.A cup final kick-off at the Millennium Stadium.

The F.A has added its backing by supplying footballs and shirts to be given out during the trip. Steve said "It's easy to forget about the problems in places like Malawi where life expectancy has fallen to below 35.

"Using the power and popularity of football, we are hoping to raise awareness in the UK and send out a positive message in Malawi itself."

A training programme has been put together by the Olympic Medical Centre, involving pounding the streets and parks of St Neots, often with a football. Steve continued: I'm bound to get some funny looks, but hopefully people will get to hear about Kick 4 Malawi and get involved themselves.

We're looking for people to raise money for us, and are hoping to get sponsorship from local companies and schools.

"One of the deals will involve wearing a T-Shirt publicising a local company whenever I'm out training – and that's likely to be quite a lot."

Steve was a master of under-statement. By the end of September he was working flat out in London for a government agency, commuting the seventy or so miles back to St Neots, then pounding the country lanes of Cambridgeshire every evening. He began by running 5 or 6 miles every day but was conscious of the Olympic Medical Centre's recommendation that he should be working his way up to a training regime of close to 100 miles per week in the run up to the challenge. At the weekends, true to his word, Steve began running through parks and playing fields dribbling a ball at his feet and wearing a bright red T-shirt with the Kick 4 Malawi details printed on the front. But during October things started to go wrong. Steve had an old football injury that had troubled him for years and the constant road running made his knee swell up painfully. The doctor recommended a complete break from training for a month. This was a major setback and for the first time Steve began to question his physical ability to complete the challenge.

200 miles further south, Steve's brother Pete was in the peak of physical fitness. Newly married, he and his university sweetheart Susie, had moved to the small village of Ferndown on the edge of the New Forest. He too was commuting every day, to Southampton where he was training to become a physiotherapist, and in the evenings he began to explore the fields and woodland tracks near his home in an effort to maintain his fitness for the challenge. One afternoon he decided to run across a tract of farmland without really knowing if he was trespassing and was confronted by quite an angry group of cows who clearly thought he was. Unperturbed, he decided in his wisdom that he could comfortably outrun a herd of cattle, and so sticking to the

hedgerow at the side of the field, sprinted past them, hoping they would lose interest. Unfortunately for Pete, this seemed to infuriate them even more and they bounded after him with surprising speed and dexterity. Shocked by this and realising that they were gaining on him, Pete panicked and dove through the bramble hedgerow to his left, scratching his arms and legs in the process and severely denting his pride. Rubbing a dock leaf onto his nettle stings, he wondered whether or not they would encounter any stampeding herds of wildebeest in Malawi and shuddered.

These incidents weighed heavily on the boys minds and convinced them that medical assistance on the trip was essential. Luckily for them, their older sister Linda and her husband Srin were both doctors and with little or no persuasion became the sixth and seventh members of the Kick 4 Malawi Team. Their role was obvious – to provide medical advice and equipment for the trip, making sure that Steve and Pete were well conditioned and hydrated to make the 250 mile journey from Lilongwe to Mzuzu safely. The two doctors were well qualified for the task.

Despite the passing of time Linda was still (in my head at least) Steve's put upon older sister who screamed when he pulled her hair and ran away when he produced worms in her vicinity. She was the baby-faced girl who played kiss chase in the playground with the older kids, and later the stropky teenager that Steve always encouraged me to antagonise with a sarcastic glance or a protruding tongue. Nearly twenty years on, Linda Bandi looked almost exactly the same, but she was now a practicing doctor who had spent time caring for the poor and afflicted in the developing world. She had worked for six months in South Africa and had taken part in mission trips to India. Like her siblings, she was intelligent and determined, and added to those qualities, had an experience of Africa that no one else in the team could boast.

Srini hailed from the Andhra Pradesh region of Southern India. He had met Linda whilst reading medicine at Leicester University and they married soon after completing their doctorates. Srini, calm and thoughtful in nature, was the perfect person to have on board the team should we encounter a medical crisis, the completion piece of the Kick 4 Malawi Team jigsaw.

Unlike Steve, things were moving at pace during the autumn of 2004 and the boys had managed to secure some good contacts and endorsements for the project, but in terms of money raised, we were falling well short of our £10,000 target. By Christmas Steve had only secured about £600 worth of sponsorship and backing from the corporate world was slow in coming. The other crew members had yet to begin their campaigns in earnest, but we all had fundraising ideas that we planned to implement in the New Year. Linda and Srini were holding a car boot sale and John and Jean Fleming had proposed a raffle.

My own fundraising efforts had been fairly pathetic. I had hoped to persuade my school to take on Kick 4 Malawi as their charity-of-the-year, but this was not to be. I had toyed with a plethora of flamboyant fundraising ideas, but had neither the courage nor the wherewithal to realise them. One of my ill-conceived brainstorms was to arrange a “Challenge Mr Light” event at school. The pupils could challenge me to a sporting activity of their choice. Bets would then be placed on the outcome of the game or activity and the money raised would go to the appeal. Apart from the problematic morality of encouraging kids to gamble, this idea came to an end when I awoke in a sweat from the following nightmare. One of my kids had challenged me to a freestyle skateboarding competition and I was teetering precariously at the top of a half-pipe waiting for the onset of certain death. My eleven year old opponent had just performed an awesome stalefishgrab with tripple salko and twist and was receiving rave reviews from his peers while I awaited my

turn. The crowd of pre-pubescents began to jeer. Humiliated, I began to cry.

Frustrated that I lacked the time or inclination to embark on a truly ambitious fundraising event, I at least consoled myself by thinking that the occasion that really mattered was the 250 mile kickathon we were attempting in May and my main aim should be to collect sponsors for that challenge. But I found it very difficult to ask people for money, especially for something that hadn't happened yet. I preferred to give people something in return for their donations, so as well as leaning on my football team and work colleagues for sponsorship, I managed to raise a few quid by loaning out the History department video collection to my pupils.

Despite the paucity of my efforts, I was struck by people's interest and enthusiasm for the challenge. From no-where I began to be introduced to people who had links with Malawi and were curious to know what we were doing. Through church contacts I met two missionaries who worked on projects in the country and were keen to get involved. I was also put in touch with several professional football coaches who wanted to know more about the appeal. Most remarkably of all, a friend of mine revealed that his tutor at university had heard about the challenge, as had the father of one of his college friends, who just so happened to be the Malawian Ambassador! People in high places were beginning to sit up and notice our crazy little challenge.

CHAPTER 4 **RADIO GAGA**

Ring-ring, ring-ring. Someone was calling my mobile in the middle of the night. I ignored it. Then my house phone joined in the trill melody. I pulled the covers up over my head; it was thumping. My mouth was as dry as a cracker factory. There was a sweet stale smell of beer hanging on the clothes I was still wearing from the night before. The evening returned to me in spasms. Steve had come down to Southampton. We had watched the England match at his parents' house. We walked into town to meet up with some old friends and drank hideous amounts of alcohol. I opened the curtains and sunlight streamed in. My alarm clock had failed me. It read 11.15am on Thursday the 31st of March 2005 and it suddenly dawned on me why both my phones were ringing simultaneously. I was fantastically late for the Kick 4 Malawi promotion at the hospital.

Half an hour later I turned up at Southampton General looking sheepish and dishevelled in my creased K4M t-shirt. The Fleming family had set up a stall outside the hospital canteen and were busily trying to recruit sponsors and sell raffle tickets. They gave me a series of knowing glances that caused me to hang my head in shame like a naughty schoolboy. I shuffled over towards them. Hospital definitely felt like the right place to be.

“Morning all” I winced, hoping that Jean wouldn’t be able to smell the alcohol on my breath. I had always been the sensible

best friend who kept her son in check and I didn't want to shatter any of her illusions. Her eldest boy was waving manically wearing a big dog outfit. He wandered over and sniffed my behind.

The dog costume had come courtesy of Southampton Football Club. Pete had been their official match-day mascot "Supersaint" for the previous two seasons. Once a fortnight at every home game he earned a token twenty quid and entry to the game by parading around St Mary's Stadium dressed as an over-excited canine in a Saints kit, waving to the youngsters in the crowd and goofing around with the players. His trademark gimmick was to crawl on all fours along the touchline and cock his leg at the away fans. Earlier in the season when Saints had played dismally against Manchester United in the FA Cup, Pete had stood next to their famously aggressive captain Roy Keane before the kick off. As I watched on Sky TV, I was amazed to see Supersaint quite deliberately and inexplicably balance on one leg and appear to cock the other towards the United hardman. Pete tried to explain after the game that he was performing a Karate move, but whatever the truth of the incident, it was either Pete or Roy Keane that was taking the piss.

Remarkably, Pete had survived the incident and had been able to borrow the Supersaint outfit for the day. He had also used his contacts at the club to have a special Saints shirt made with Kick 4 Malawi written on the back. After an hour in the cumbersome suit, it was now Steve's turn to wave mutely at patients and nurses as they walked to and from the hospital canteen. In the foyer John and Jean had erected a stall with maps and photographs and were busy selling raffle tickets to passers-by. Southampton football club had given Pete free match tickets and other goodies to give away and many people had bought tickets or had signed on to sponsor the challenge.

By mid day it was time for Steve to have a break from being a giant cuddly toy and I took on the Supersaint Mantle. It was the

second time I'd put on the heavy dog costume, the first being a cameo I'd done at Pete's wedding the previous summer. It had been the hottest day of the year and I was required to sweat in the suit and do a comic turn as part of Steve's best man's speech. I had nearly fainted it was so hot, but had rather enjoyed the attention it brought. Supersaint, it seemed, was something of a cult hero in Southampton.

It felt good to be a local celebrity; waving to young children and seeing their faces beam with delight. It was well worth the heat and claustrophobia of being encased in an itchy layer of fur. There was one little girl however who found me to be the scariest monster in the world, and buried her face in her hands as she hurried past. I tried to reassure her, but she wailed uncontrollably as I lumbered towards her like some demonic three dimensional cartoon. Despite my young critic, most people in the hospital that day smiled, waved or even hugged me as they walked past. The spectacle was certainly capturing people's attention and getting them interested in our cause. Some diehard Saints fans even insisted on being photographed with Supersaint and asked for his autograph! We obliged in exchange for a donation, but not being able to see properly or use my fingers with any great dexterity, all they really got for their money was an illegible mass of squiggles.

"To squiggle, all the best, from Supersquiggle."

Later in the day, the real Supersaint (Pete had donned the costume once again) took a bucket around the wards and by the time we left, the Kick 4 Malawi challenge had gained £700 in cash and sponsorship pledges to add to the growing total. It was the beginning of April and that total now stood at nearly £6,500 and it had largely been down to local businesses and the generosity of churches in the Southampton area. John Fleming and I had promoted the challenge at various services and had collected about £1,000 worth of sponsorship money, but despite this home-town generosity, with the campaign nearing an end; it

seemed unlikely that we would reach our ten-grand target, unless we achieved greater media coverage.

Earlier in the morning I had missed the journalist who had come to interview the boys for a full page story that was later published in the Southampton Echo under the headline “AIDS campaign’s 250-mile kick-off”.

Being covered by the local press was all well and good, but what we really needed was national coverage. The Sun had featured the boys one day in their tiny “Sun Spot” section and the Independent had mentioned Pete’s involvement in the challenge in their sports round up. But I thought the brother’s endeavour was worthy of some TV exposure. I started writing to various figures in the television industry, telling them about the challenge and asking whether they’d be interested in making a programme about our expedition, or at least featuring us on any existing shows. We had planned to kick-off the 250 mile dribble on May 21st to coincide with the FA Cup Final, and this in my mind offered innumerable tie-in opportunities with programmes such as Football Focus or Match of the Day.

The immediate response however was not particularly positive, although a local news programme was keen to run a story on the challenge as soon as it was completed. Apparently there were plenty of other note-worthy charity challenges taking place at the same time that pushed us out of the scheduling. The most notable being two rowers attempting to circumnavigate the British Isles. They were planning to raise a staggering £1 million for good causes. It made our efforts seem quite insignificant in comparison, and I began to wonder just how newsworthy our story really was.

At the beginning of the month I had received an e-mail from Simon Elmes from the BBC’s Features and Documentaries Department, who seemed to reiterate the fact that although the corporation was interested in the TV potential of Kick 4 Malawi,

there were a number of similar charity challenges that the BBC were already turning into programmes.

This was disappointing, but when on the 3rd of March a letter dropped on my mat from one of the country's most recognisable football pundits, I started to believe that perhaps an appearance on Match of the Day or Football Focus might not be so far fetched after all.

Dear Mr Light,

Thank you for your letter of 10th February. I will be passing a copy of your letter to the editors of various programmes who may be interested in featuring the trek. I hope that some of them will be able to help you with publicity.

In the meantime, however, I would like to wish the boys success with Kick 4 Malawi. It's a great cause and it deserves every support.

Best wishes,

Gary Lineker

I carried the letter around with me for days like a holy relic, showing it reverently to my friends at every opportunity. Receiving a letter from such a high profile name was exciting, and I really felt that television exposure on a football themed show would enable us to gain enough publicity to reach our £10,000 sponsorship target. But as the weeks rolled on without any further interest from those I had contacted within the TV arena, I began to think that Gary was too busy scoffing crisps to get us on the telly. Even if he had passed on our letter as he said he would, he had probably passed it to Simon Elmes in the Features and Documentaries Department. Now with just two weeks to go before we flew to Malawi it was looking as though we would not achieve our promotional or financial targets, but that was all quite spectacularly about to change.

One evening in early May I received a rather curious text message from Pete.

“Digger, u need 2 write a song about K4M”

“Why?” I had replied.

“Because it’s gonna b played in front of 30,000 people at the ManU game nxt wk!”

Writing a song for the project was not a new idea. Steve and I had played guitar and sung together when we were teenagers. As an acoustic duo we went under various guises; Utopia, A Drug Called Fame, and then finally plain Steve & Dave. Our music was a combination of energetic pop thrashed out on acoustic guitars and painful ballads about soppy teenage romance. Our output was prolific, our performance was dire, but as ever, our enthusiasm outshone our limited ability. We even recorded several shoddily made albums which we sold to gullible friends and fawning grandparents before our inevitable retirement.

Pete had been our biggest fan, and to this day is convinced that I in particular am the recipient of a divinely inspired song-writing talent – a belief that had lain dormant in my own mind since the time I had last penned a song for a girlfriend. After performing the rendition I looked up expecting rapturous applause, a big hug and comments about how sweet and talented I was. Instead she sat back and said nothing; nothing at all. I drove her home in silence. As this tended to be how all my relationships ended, I hadn’t been overly perturbed at the time, but it did start me questioning whether a) I could hold a tune, b) play the guitar, or c) write a song. Pete, however, had no such doubts. He could recite the lyrics to songs I couldn’t even remember writing. His adoration of my music was the closest I had ever come to being hero-worshipped, and I kind of loved it, even though I was never quite sure whether or not he was taking the mickey.

Over New Years Steve and I were holidaying in Norfolk and had sat down in front of a log fire with the express intention of re-kindling the old Fleming/Light magic and writing a Kick 4 Malawi theme tune. The result did indeed re-kindle memories of our musical past. The song was bloody awful.

“Kick for Malawi

We’re kicking for a better world

Kick for Malawi

We’re kicking for the boys and girls”, chugged the lumpy chorus.

It was an insanely catchy tune, you had to hand it to us, but the lyrics were so cheesy you could have stuck them on a cocktail stick with a piece of pineapple and served them at a barn dance. We decided, quite wisely, to put the theme-tune idea on the back burner.

But Pete had other ideas. Whilst working at St Mary’s Stadium, he had met youth team coach and ex-player David Puckett, who by chance had recently returned from an F.A. coaching trip to Malawi. He was very excited for Pete and urged him to approach Southampton F.C and find ways to promote the K4M project. A meeting with club officials resulted in an on-pitch interview and an article in the match-day programme entitled “Supersaint on Safari”. The publicity this could generate for the cause was mouth-watering, but Pete didn’t stop there. In his meeting he had blurted out something about a Kick 4 Malawi theme-tune. “Great” said the club secretary, “We’ll play it over the speaker system next Sunday during the last game of the season.”

I was in a panic. There was no way that I was going to be humiliated in front of a crowd of my fellow Sotonians, singing a corny song about kicking for a better world. I had to write, and record something entirely new in less than a week. That Friday night I arranged for Pete to come around and help; after all, he had got me into this mess. He arrived late, at around 10, as ever, in an ebullient mood. Nothing ever fazed Peter Fleming. He

oozed self-assurance and had an easy manner and charm that could melt ice, but on this occasion, even his laid back composure could not evaporate my cold sweat. We had to write something – tonight. The pressure was on!

“Well maybe we could try re-working the song that Steve and I wrote in January” I began, trying in vain to defy the gravity of our situation. I played Pete the song.

Pete returned his verdict; “No, it’s awful! Why don’t you try to add new lyrics to an old song of yours, that way we’ll only have half the work to do. How about “Ribbon Girl”; that was a good one.”

Ribbon Girl was a song I’d written in 2001 that had received relative acclaim from, well... my relatives. A modest accolade for my efforts but the tune was possibly the best in my extensive yet mediocre back-catalogue, and I was happy to use it as a base for a new arrangement. I began to play the chords, a little faster than usual, and improvise words over the tune. Without thinking, the first thing I sang was “Lying in my bed at night, thinking about the orphans, thinking about their plight.” It was a truly cringe-worthy lyric that I fully intended to replace, but it got the ball pen rolling and the creative juices flowing. The lyric never did get changed, a fact that I still rue every time I listen to the opening bars and wince knowing just what the cretin with the familiar whiney voice is about to sing.

The rest of the lyric progressed very slowly. In my defence, it is incredibly hard to write a charity song with a serious message in a very short and pressurised space of time. My mind recalls a radio interview with Bob Geldolf in which he claimed to have been horrified to put his name to such a terrible piece of song-writing as “Do they know it’s Christmas?”, the record which propelled his Band Aid campaign in 1985, and yet at the same time he’d been elated that it had raised so much money. I consoled myself with the thought that this was never going to be a brilliant piece of song-writing, but it was functional and on this

occasion that was all that mattered. Who cared if 30,000 people at the Saints game thought it sucked as long as the reason behind it stuck in their memories?

Luckily my housemate wondered in from the pub at 11 to add some much needed direction to our lyrical musings. Becky Sampson was a music teacher and I valued her input. She tweaked a few things and added a word or two and by 1.30 am, we had a song that I was reasonably happy with. All I had to worry about now was recording the thing.

Phil Le Cheminant was a bona fide genius, of that there was no doubt. He was the best musician I knew and had a string of musical accomplishments to his credit. He had played at the Royal Albert Hall as part of the Solent Youth Jazz Orchestra and was now forging a promising career as a producer and multimedia designer from his small studio in Romsey. He could play the drums like Keith Moon, the keyboards like Stevie Wonder, the bass like Mark King and the guitar like Eric Clapton's mum – the guitar being the only chink in his impressive musical armoury – a skill he had never quite been able to master due to his huge hands and sausage-like fingers. Yes, Phil was a veritable one man band, minus a guitar, and that's where I stepped in. I had played guitar in a number of Phil's musical projects over the years, even playing alongside him at his own wedding, where he only got up from his keyboard reluctantly to sign the register. We had become firm friends, and if anyone could make my hastily assembled tune sound professional and musically acceptable to the ears of thousands of listeners, it was Philip Malcolm Le Cheminant.

Two days later and just one week before the Manchester United game, I was sitting in Phil's studio with a guitar on my lap, still feeling unconfident about the song Pete and I had written. Phil was hunched over his computer, making the necessary adjustments to his recording software. He had very

kindly agreed to take time out from his busy schedule to work on Sunday as his contribution to the Kick 4 Malawi cause. In fact, he was relishing the considerable challenge of making my voice sound good. He spun his chair around and asked me to play the song through.

“Ok, well this is one that Steve and I wrote in January.”

Pete looked at me incredulously

“Why are you playing that one?” he asked, “It’s rubbish! Play the one we wrote on Friday.”

“Well I’ll play both and then Phil can decide which one we should record.” I said, still looking to pull one last iron out of the Fleming/Light musical fire. In actual fact, I think I was concerned that lyrically at least, both songs we had come up with were pretty awful, and it was merely going to come down to musical preference which one got used. Phil’s opinion of the first tune was predictable.

“It’s awful, Digger! Let’s hear the other one.”

I played him the tune Pete and I had scrambled together and the big man’s face lit up.

“Now this I can work with!” he grinned.

After more knob-twiddling it was time to don a pair of headphones and confine myself to Phil’s make-shift recording booth. Knowing that time was of the essence, I concentrated like I had never concentrated before and sung the song through in one take. I had to re-sing one or two phrases, but generally Phil was pleased with my efforts and began layering the song with bass, drums and keys, all played expertly on a tiny synthesizer linked to his computer. Pete and I could only marvel at Phil’s skill and musical know-how.

For 4 hours on that Sunday afternoon we watched as Phil created a jewel from our raw material. Pete went into the booth and added a gravelly backing vocal that gave a soulful dimension

to the song and by 5 o'clock the work was nearly finished. All that remained was to find a rhyming couplet for the outro chord sequence. We had racked our brains to think of a succinct phrase that could end the song on a memorable high, just like "Feed the world, let them know it's Christmas time" had done for the Band Aid record. It was no good – even Phil was stumped. As a last resort we phoned Steve and gave him some strict and urgent instructions. "We need a memorable rhyming couplet that sums up the challenge to end the song with, and hurry up; we need it within the next 15 minutes!"

Typically, Steve was back on the phone after 5, with more than just the two lines we required. He had virtually re-written the song. We scribbled down what he'd come up with and within minutes I was back in the booth, trying to attach the words to the last chord progression. Incredibly, the words and music gelled perfectly and provided just the catchy hook that we needed.

"In the warm heart of Africa

Let us battle with defeat

Let us tackle things together

Let us live the dreams we speak

Let us smile with every sunrise

Let us dance to every beat

From Lilongwe to Mzuzu

We are talking with our feet."

Thanks to Steve we had a catchy ending, and Phil had created a real African feel to the record by incorporating bongos and congas into the mix so that the song sounded relevant to its theme. During the week, Phil arranged to have the song digitally mastered and compressed especially for radio airplay, and on

Saturday 14th May, all the hard work paid off as Steve introduced the song to a live audience of BBC Radio Solent listeners.

On the morning of the broadcast I could hardly contain my excitement. We had been told that Steve would be interviewed on air at 1pm during the Sportstime spot by presenter Tristan Pascoe who was keen to promote our project. The show started at 12 and I listened to the radio with the avid concentration of a schoolboy taking his French listening exam. I had texted my entire mobile phonebook, ordering them all to tune in.

“Welcome to BBC Radio Solent, this is Sportstime with me Tristan Pascoe. Well this certainly is a crucial weekend for the South’s teams. Southampton take on the mighty Manchester United tomorrow in their last match of the season. Can they do the unthinkable and beat the third placed former champions to avoid relegation? It’s a tough challenge but they desperately need all three points to pull themselves away from the drop zone. We’ll be chatting to manager Harry Redknapp later in the show. Talking about near impossible challenges, local brothers Steve and Pete Fleming are dribbling their way into the history books next week as they fly out to Malawi to kick a ball 250 miles in just 10 days to raise money for charity. I’ll be chatting to Steve about his amazing plans a bit later on. In the meantime, here’s Level 42 with Running in the Family.”

Despite the promised 1pm airing, Steve was interviewed by Tristan at 12.30 which meant that most of my friends missed the broadcast. Luckily though I caught the whole thing on tape and did not miss an opportunity to play it to anyone and everyone who arrived at my house over the next 10 days. After chatting to Steve about the nature of the challenge and making a plea for donations, Tristan said something that made my heart skip a beat;

“So Steve, I hear you’ve made a charity record for the Kick 4 Malawi campaign, tell us a little bit about the single.”

“Er, yes Tristan, we’ve made a record which will be played to the crowd at tomorrow’s game! My mate Dave Light who is coming to Malawi with us has written a brilliant song which can also be downloaded from our website; www.kick4malawi.com for a small donation to the charity.”

“That’s great. Well we wish you all the best for the run Steve. I’ll let you be the DJ for this next introduction.”

“Thanks Tristan, well here it is, this is Dave Light and “Kick 4 Malawi”!

There was a short pause before the rhythmical drums and opening chords kicked in and for a few seconds I swear that I was the happiest man in Hampshire. Then, a cataclysmic realisation dawned upon me and my face fell.

*“Lying in my bed at night
Thinkin’ ‘bout the orphans
Thinkin’ ‘bout their plight...”*

3pm the following afternoon I was at my parent’s house and again listening avidly to the radio, but this time all ego-massaging thoughts of pop stardom had been put on hold. According to Supersaint (the only one of us able to attend the game), the Kick 4 Malawi song had been played 20 minutes before the kick-off, but that was unimportant to me now. The sickening feeling that football fans know only too well began to sweep over me. It was an all or nothing game. Southampton had to beat Manchester United to remain in the Premiership; it was as simple as that. But unlike watching the inevitable climax to yet another inglorious England World Cup failure, I was surprisingly optimistic about this one. During all of my 28 years, the Saints had never been relegated from the top division and season after season the pundits that profess to be in the know usually predicted that they would succumb to the dreaded drop. But come May, sometimes by the slimmest of margins, the Saints had always somehow managed to survive. And what was more, our record against the

mighty Man U was a good one. My mind recalled the 6-3 victory inspired by a legendary performance from Matt Le-Tissier, not to mention the famous David vs Goliath triumph; the 1976 F.A Cup Final.

So despite my nervous tension, I was not overly amazed when after 10 minutes the Saints took a surprise lead. Admittedly it was through an own goal, but I screamed deliriously along with my two Saints-mad brothers Stew and Tim who were listening to the game with me. But the relief of another incredible escape from the jaws of relegation did not materialise. Just 9 minutes later Darren Fletcher equalised and Ruud van Nistlerooy nodded home the winner midway through the second half. I couldn't believe it.

Incredibly, inconceivably, the Saints, my boyhood team had gone down, and to add insult to injury, my song, played to the enthusiastic supporters before the game, piped into the home dressing room as the players pulled on their shirts, had heralded not a miraculous escape, but an ignominious defeat. The Saints finished the season at the bottom of the Premier League.

I couldn't escape the irony of it all. For years I had dreamt of pop-star fame and fortune, and now, when finally my fleeting glimpse of musical accomplishment had arrived, it was a cheesy charity song, played to a distracted audience on a day to forget.

But the bad news didn't end there. After the game, Steve phoned to say that his ongoing knee problems had forced him to recognise that the boys would have to complete their daily marathons in relay rather than run the full distance together. This would still be an incredible feat of endurance, but not quite what the brothers had initially conceived.

Despite this blow, Steve inflated the dead air of disappointment by telling me that the recent publicity had pushed our total fundraising sum to over £13,000. At last, with 3 days to go, we had reached our target!

CHAPTER 5 A LILONGWE AWAY

I glanced up from my desk and then back down. I looked up again. It was no use – they were still there. Kids. Lots of kids, and they were expecting me to teach them something about History. It was Thursday the 19th of May 2005 and I had two more lessons to get through before I headed for Heathrow. I hadn't planned a thing. I began to wonder how long I could procrastinate before any of the children noticed they weren't getting an education. My mind was working overtime. I had several options. I could feign illness and pretend to faint, but that would create too much chaos, not to mention amusement that I would never be able to live down. I could whip myself up into a fit of rage and send them all out of the room for misbehaving. That would be a long-shot. I looked up again. They were the most obedient wide-eyed and expectant group of twelve year olds I had ever seen. I began to sweat.

My thoughts turned to the momentous fortnight ahead. I just wasn't prepared for any of it. Two weeks ago I had developed what had turned into the worst cold of my life. I had a cough like a foghorn and my nose felt like the Itaipu Dam. I had plied myself with Paracetamol, hosed my sinuses with Vicks, and drank gallons of Lemsip, but nothing seemed to be working. It looked like I would be travelling to the third-world feeling decidedly third-rate. Feeling rotten, I had muddled through the last few school days and spent my final night in the UK panic buying in Asda. I crawled into bed at 2am having finally crushed

my suitcase into submission. I hadn't given any thought to what I was going to teach Year 8...until now.

Of course! Rule number one in the slack teacher's book of easy lessons – show them a video! Now what did I have in my cupboard on Medieval Warfare? Could I get away with showing Braveheart to twelve year olds? I looked up one last time, a nervous smile beginning to emerge on my face. About to admit defeat and confess all, I noticed that my walls were looking very bare.

“Ok kids, today we're going to be working on some History displays to turn my room into the most colourful place in the school. You have free reign to create posters, documents, pictures or letters based on your studies this term. You have one hour, off you go!” Excellent. I was a genius.

It was a botched job, but it gave me time to finish planning my cover lessons for the days I would be away. By mid-day I had a pile of resources packed and labelled for the following week, and a very colourful wall. I fairly dashed to the staff room to say my goodbyes.

On the way to the airport the usual butterflies began to accumulate in my stomach. I had always suffered from anxiety. Most worriers externalise their fears. They ask questions, they get flustered and start to panic. But I'm like a rabbit caught in the headlights. My face is fixed to deadpan, my tongue freezes, and the fear goes straight to my stomach, which screws itself up like a doomed hedgehog, waiting for it's contents to be squished and projected in all directions. The thought of leaving my well cultivated comfort zones to take part in some crazy trek across East Africa filled me with a potent mixture of excitement and dread. And the cocktail was shaken, not stirred.

The most laid back man in the world beamed at me from the backseat of Jean Fleming's car.

“I can’t wait to get out there Digger, I’m so excited I could wet myself!”

I crow-barred a smile from my lips and nodded at Pete in feigned agreement. How could he be so calm? There were a million and one things to worry about, and those thoughts were buzzing around my head like evil wasps coming at me stings first. Could we complete the challenge? Would we stay healthy? My arms still felt heavy from the barrage of injections I’d had in the weeks prior to the trip. I was now immune to just about every disease this side of smallpox, and it had cost me a small fortune.

Two months before the flight Steve had added to the bill by hiring a guide to look after us and book our accommodation. We would be in safe hands on the trek but it meant my savings were completely spent. If that was something I could afford to worry about when I returned, there was still plenty of anxiety saved up for our arrival in Malawi. Amazingly, just three weeks before the trip, the St John’s Project in Mzuzu, the organisation that was to benefit most from our exploits, were still completely unaware that we were coming. Steve had organised everything through the charity Action Aid and presumed they had made the necessary arrangements. Our contact in Malawi, Martha was friendly and helpful but extremely laid back. She hadn’t even notified the Malawian authorities of the trip. There was a real possibility that we would have problems with traffic and border police. Steve had suspected that Action Aid were happy to take the money we’d raised but were less focussed when it came to helping us organise our challenge. He took the liberty of phoning the St John’s Project directly to check the arrangements.

“Hello, my name is Stephen Fleming, I’m part of a team that are kicking a football to Mzuzu to raise money for your project. Do you know we’re coming?”

“You’re what?” came a confused African voice down the line. “You’re doing what?!!!!”

By the time we arrived at Heathrow, I had worked myself into a lather of panic and alarm. It was obvious that Jean Fleming was also in a flap. She was waving goodbye to her entire family, and she seemed on the verge of tears both proud and fearful.

We found Steve and his father-in-law having a leisurely lunch in the airport Burger King. Seeing Steve serenely munching on a Whopper without a care in the world brought back some soothing memories. We'd been through some scrapes before; always survived, and always enjoyed testing ourselves in the process. This would be no different. And that was it. From that moment on I decided to abandon my fears. Wistfully, almost subconsciously, I said a prayer, committing my health and safety into the hands of the Almighty, and with a deep breath took in a shot of unprecedented peace.

John McCarthy was also a calm man. He had the brazen appearance of an Englishman on safari – khaki shirt and knee length shorts, sunglasses and more suitcases that he could possibly need. He had definitely come prepared and had a plethora of mosquito nets, bug sprays and alarms that marked him out as a true Brit abroad. The other John was buzzing around his suitcase, checking that he'd brought enough tea and sugar. Tea was always John's primary concern. Linda was also doubly prepared and itching to go, but did not share her brothers' laid back approach to life. She paced the airport lobby nervously waiting for the check-in desk to open, her quiet and unassuming husband Srinu in tow, attempting to calm her down. Steve, Pete and I gave each other excited looks as we waited. This was the dawn of another crazy adventure; the calm before the storm.

There was a minor kaffuffle at the security check when it emerged that John F was trying to smuggle some sharp toe-nail scissors onto the plane, but apart from that our departure from Heathrow was smooth, if a little tedious. Likewise, the plane journey to Johannesburg was dull. Trapped like a sardine

between the two Johns, I tried to doze the evening away as best I could, and made a point of eating as much of the in-flight food as possible - I was still recovering from my mammoth cold, and felt I needed to restore my strength. Steve and John McCarthy didn't sleep at all, it's a wonder that anyone does on long-haul flights in economy class. Every inch of space is accounted for. You are packaged and hermetically sealed like the food you're given to eat.

I fidgeted and flicked through the channels as the hours passed slowly. Pete, still the most laid-back man in the world, slept like a baby. He could sleep on a slab of concrete. In fact, I'd seen him do it. Next to him Steve, never a man to show much emotion, was looking calm, but must have been feeling more than a touch apprehensive. Would the guide be there to meet us? Would the challenge be completed? Would Claire be ok? Should he be leaving her at a time like this? Had he been selfish to distract himself from the trials of planning a family? Kick 4 Malawi was his baby now, his challenge; the offspring of nine months of fundraising and preparation, and he consoled himself by remembering Claire's proud eyes as she kissed him goodbye.

Johannesburg Airport was my first experience of Africa. The profusion of gift shops selling leopard skin kitsch was disorientating. Were we really in Africa, or just a commercialised Disney version? The burley porters who aggressively tried to gain our custom left me in no doubt. Linda was in her element. She had spent six months in the country during her gap year and had returned to Southampton with a fully formed Afrikaans accent. Steve had ribbed her mercilessly. Now after just a few hours in the airport, her "Bokky" twang was beginning to return. As we left to board, John Fleming politely explained to a massive black porter that he did not want his luggage carried, but soon got embroiled in a conversation he could not fully understand. Linda stepped in forcefully;

“Ya Dad, you jest hef to ignore the porters. Ef you let thim carry yo begs, they’ll hound you fo meny.” And with that Linda pushed the huge porter out of the way with one hand, like a Springbok winger running for the try line. She was a formidable woman Linda Fleming, and we followed her to the boarding gate slightly in awe.

At 11am we stepped on the small Boeing that would take us to Malawi. The sky was blue and cloudless and it was developing into a warm day. As the plane taxied along the runway I looked around the cabin wondering what sort of people were travelling to this small forgotten land, 919 miles to the north-west of Johannesburg. The plane was only half full and most of the travellers were black Africans. Many of them wore dog-collars or religious clothing, like the large-bodied nun who sat to my left. As she mopped her brow with a small white handkerchief, I felt a sudden pang of compassion. She must have been sweltering in her coarse black habit. She ordered a lemonade then fell into a blissful sleep that lasted the entire 3 hour journey and prevented much conversation. Instead I listened to the one developing behind me. Linda was talking to an American man named Mike. He seemed like a friendly guy and with his moustache and nerdy glasses, reminded me somewhat of Ned Flanders from the Simpsons. Soon Linda was introducing him to the rest of us and telling our story. He seemed impressed.

“Wow, that’s amazing!” He said enthusiastically “You’re going to kick a soccer ball all that way? That’s gonna take some doing! I wish y’all the best.”

Mike was a doctor who had worked on several AIDS projects in Africa but this was his first trip to “The Warm Heart” as he put it.

The warm heart it certainly was becoming, and I peeled off another layer to reveal my red Kick 4 Malawi t-shirt. The others were also wearing theirs now and we looked like a formula one

pit crew on vacation. Mike studied our logo carefully and read the brief;

“Tackling AIDS and poverty through football, that’s a worthy cause guys, Malawi sure needs your help.”

It began to dawn on me that the majority of people on the plane were humanitarian workers, and it brought our own mission back into focus. An adventure though it certainly was, we were not on holiday; we were here to help some of the most needy people on earth. It was a sobering thought that stuck with me. Having that as a goal made me more determined to take the rough with the smooth and not to be so apprehensive about what would happen in the days ahead.

Mike was part of a mission team from Pennsylvania. They were staying with a woman in Lilongwe who had once been a member of their Pentecostal church, and their goal – as far as I could gather and for reasons I failed to fathom – was to paint a grain silo. There were 11 in Mike’s team – a mixed crew of painters; old and young, male and female, short and tall, and...well...very tall. Among their number was an ex-International basketball player. He was over 7 feet in height – a huge man wearing a baseball cap, his legs and arms spilling out over his cramped seat like a giant spider. I wondered whether he’d been drafted in to paint the hard-to-reach bits. Mike leant over to Pete and whispered curiously; “Don’t mention Munich – Larry was there.”

Steve and Pete had been passing the time by asking each other sports related questions and Mike had assumed their knowledge of all things athletic was sufficient for him not to explain. Larry had been in the U.S basketball team at the Munich Olympics in 1972. The Gold medal favourites had been beaten controversially in the final by a last minute basket. At the height of the cold war, their defeat by the Russians had been a major humiliation. Larry, along with his disgusted team mates had refused their silver

medals, which remain to this day in a bank vault in Munich. The Flemings nodded and smiled knowingly back at Mike.

Leaning over the snoozing nun, I caught my first few glimpses of the Malawian landscape as the plane began circling down through wispy cotton thin clouds. I'm not quite sure what I was expecting; a herd of elephants marching across the grassy savannah, trumpeting up at the skies as we flew overhead perhaps. In reality the dusty brown terrain below, speckled with trees and greenery looked remarkably mundane, but the sheer expanse of land without any sign of man's influence was impressive enough. It was a topography that had changed very little in the 3 thousand years since the small Akafula people of West Africa, perhaps motivated by famine or some other natural disaster, had migrated South and East to the Great Rift Valley. It was the same open expanse that had greeted the Bantu speakers who had travelled from Zaire and Ghana at around the time of Christ, bringing with them the first iron tools into the region. This was the Africa of the past, present and future, vast and unchanging, so unlike our claustrophobic and chameleon-like city sprawls.

The plane banked again sharply and I grew tense. We seemed to be at a 45 degree angle as we turned to land at Lilongwe's Kamuzu Airport, and I gripped my seat fearing the plane would flip over at any second. It was a stomach churning descent which ended in a bumpy landing. Stepping out of the plane we were enveloped in a claustrophobic blanket of heat as we wandered into the small arrivals lounge and had to queue for what seemed like an age to have our passports checked. According to our guide books, Kamuzu Airport was the most modern building in the capital city and provided the most jobs for its people. In comparison to our airports however, it was a small and shabby affair, perhaps only half the size of Southampton's.

One by one our passports were stamped by stern looking officials, and we passed through to a sticky hall to collect our

luggage, all except Srini, who had an Indian passport and as a result was being interrogated rather harshly by a group of armed border guards. Eventually he paid the equivalent of £30 for a visa and was allowed through to the arrivals lounge. He joined us with a wan smile and bemoaned the fact that his nationality never allowed him the travelling congenialities afforded to the British. The next hurdle was to make sure all our bags were collected from the carousel. It was a relief to find that all our luggage and equipment had been put on the plane, and once collected; we walked over towards the two customs officials waiting to check our bags.

As Steve and I stepped forward we both suddenly realised that our cases contained roughly 14 kilos of a suspicious looking white powder. We looked at each other and mirrored an expression of alarm; “The Lucozade powder!” Visions of a night in a dank cell, surrounded by police dipping their fingers in the fake blow and getting high on the sugar buzz, passed through my mind. “Nothing to declare” said Steve rather unconvincingly and a female official gave him a wary look and asked him to open one of his suitcases. Luckily, the Lucozade was in another bag. The one that was opened contained nothing but thirteen deflated footballs. “Um...we’re going to play a lot of football” grinned Steve nervously.

The officials gave each other a puzzled look and then with an air of incredulity let us pass through. It was a great relief. We waited for the whole team to gather in the airport lobby before we headed towards the exit, hoping that our guide for the duration of the trip would be waiting for us. We turned a corner to find a man with a huge grin that flashed strikingly across his dark features. He was wearing the neat sleeveless shirt and khaki shorts of a safari guide and carried a cardboard sign which read “The Kick for Malawi Team”. As soon as he saw our bright red t-shirts he let out an infectious and melodic laugh, somewhere between an Eddie Murphy and an Emlyn Hughes, and shook our

hands enthusiastically. “Welcome to Malawi” he beamed and laughed again. We liked him instantly.

Henry Gondula was to be our guide for the next thirteen days. A thick set man in his early 40’s, we all thought he resembled a beefy looking Pele with his high forehead and permanent grin. He was one of 3 guides working for Land and Lake Safaris, a small safari company operating from Lilongwe, taking tourists to and from the major national parks in Malawi and Zambia.

Henry’s first task was to load our luggage onto the roof of his seven-seater Toyota Landcruiser – the safari vehicle we had hired to transport us across the country. With our bags on board, it was rather a tight fit, but we realised that as the challenge unfolded, the Landcruiser, minus our luggage and at least one of the Flemings, would make a reasonably comfortable home for the support crew as we crawled alongside the runners every day. It was quite a tatty vehicle. The seats were torn and a crack had stretched across the entire length of the windscreen.

“How did the windscreen get cracked Henry?” I asked as we pulled away from the airport car park, expecting an interesting tale involving a herd of wildebeest or stampeding rhinoceros. “Did you run into an animal?”

“Oh nothing that exciting!” said Henry, flashing another infectious smile, “The roads in Malawi are not so good. It was a chip that leapt up from the road and the crack has grown ever since.” It was a crack that would have put the Toyota off the road anywhere in Western Europe. I hoped the rest of the safari truck was in good working order. It was going to be covering some decent mileage over the next few days.

The journey from the airport to the capital was a bumpy twenty minute ride along the M1 – Malawi’s main highway which ran the length of the country from north to south. It was a dusty tarmac road in reasonable condition, a welcome discovery as tomorrow

Pete and Steve would be kicking a football along in the opposite direction. The countryside around us seemed relatively flat with a gentle series of inclines as we reached the outskirts of Lilongwe. I did not expect the brothers to reach the airport on the first day of the challenge. It seemed a huge distance to cover on foot in one day.

As we drove along we quizzed Henry about his life in Malawi. He told us that he had worked as a guide for the past 4 years and before that had been a coal miner and used car salesman before his business had gone bust. Raised in Zimbabwe, he had returned to his native Malawi at the age of 15 and now had a wife and four children living in the suburbs of Lilongwe. Henry was a quiet, even tempered man, but was friendly and talkative enough to answer our questions and respond to our nervous small-talk politely.

As we neared the city the scenery around us became greener and lush trees and bushes lined the roadside. The rainy season had passed in April and infused the land with the colour and vitality it lacked at other times of the year. There were dark clouds developing in the distance and the heat of the mid-day sun had disappeared. Pete leaned across to the driver. "Henry, will it rain today?"

"Oh no, no, there will be no rain until September" Henry assured us. Later that night Lilongwe found itself beneath a turbulent thunderstorm, the first of several downpours on the trip, but we could forgive Henry's optimism. He was pleased to point out cultural sites of interest as we entered the capital, and took an obvious pride in his country. By the road people wearing brightly coloured t-shirts and colourful patterned dresses carried baskets of goods into the town. At various intersections men gathered at what appeared to be barbecues, selling various kinds of meat to passers by. As we passed one street corner I found myself doing a cartoon-like double take.

"Is that what I think it is Henry?"

“Oh yes” Henry smiled. “Mice on a stick!” they are selling roasted mice on a stick.”

My stomach turned. I hoped we weren’t having rodent kebabs for our tea.

We turned a corner and Henry pointed out the Civo Stadium. It was where the boys were due to start the challenge the following morning. The crumbling white plaster walls were being attacked by wild ivy. My visions of a glorious send off surrounded by thousands of cheering football fans took a dent. Wembley it was not.

Lilongwe seemed a curious entity – an African city. The majority of its buildings were concreted prefabrications or makeshift shanties, but every now and then a westernised hotel or office block with clean whitewashed walls and immaculately kept gardens, rose contemptuously from the rubble stricken surroundings. These buildings and facilities were for rich businessmen and civil servants only, who were slowly bringing European, American and Asian investment into the city. Every few metres we were confronted with huge billboards displaying American style advertisements for coca cola and other commercial giants. Others promoted safe sex and the use of condoms, a testament to the growing push towards AIDS awareness in a country already ravaged by the disease.

The guide books describe Lilongwe as one of Africa’s blandest capitals. This is mainly due to the fact that it had its capital status thrust upon it only in recent years. Founded in 1906 on the banks of the Lilongwe River, its position along the main Malawi to Zambia trade route made it the perfect commercial centre for the growing Asian business community. By 1975 it had grown to a population of 40,000 people and its central location persuaded government officials to make it the country’s capital instead of the larger, more important city of Blantyre in the south, and the cultural capital, Zomba to the north. But apart from its status, there is very little to see or do in Lilongwe for

tourists. There are, however, plenty of hotels to accommodate travellers from the airport on their way to Blantyre or one of the many beautiful national parks elsewhere in the country. Many of them are owned by the wealthy Asian community. We soon arrived at one of them – The Korean Garden Lodge, our first destination.

The hotel was a spacious compound surrounded by a high concrete wall and security gate. Guards patrolled the entrance and pulled back the green steel shutters to let us into the complex. After saying our goodbyes to the cheerful Henry, we found our rooms and began to unpack our equipment in preparation for the start of the challenge. We had barely unlocked our suitcases when John Fleming poked his head through the door.

“Cuppa tea anyone?”

Our long journey absorbing the sights and sounds of Lilongwe had left us tired but John’s first brew of the trip had revived us just enough for our meeting at 4pm with two representatives from Action Aid. We met Martha Khonje and Ken Matekenya by the hotel pool and they welcomed us warmly to their country. Ken was the Project Support Coordinator for Action Aid but he let his colleague Martha do most of the talking. Martha was young, pretty, and business-like in her green pattern dress and spectacles. She seemed serious and confident as she spoke, but was unmistakably African in her laid-back manner.

“On behalf of Action Aid we would like to welcome you, the Kick4Malawi team to Malawi. We are very pleased that you have chosen our country to embark upon this formidable challenge to raise funds for our charity.”

She then handed out an itinerary for the following day’s events.

“Tomorrow we have arranged a press conference to take place at the Civo Stadium at 10am. Members of the Malawian press will be on hand to interview you and ask questions about the challenge.”

“Will we be charged for the press conference?” Steve interrupted, knowing that in many African countries, if you have a newsworthy story to tell, you will often have to pay for the coverage yourself.

“No” continued Martha, “Action Aid will foot the bill and we will arrange for the newspaper reporters to be transported to the stadium. Yesterday Malawi’s top Newspaper, the Nation ran a story on you.” She produced the copy of the national newspaper and handed it to us. In the sports section at the back of the paper was a full page article under the headline “English brothers begin longest walk.” We were all impressed that our story was already in print.

“There is a lot of interest from the press” interjected Ken “Radio and television journalists will also be there tomorrow as well as members of the Football Association of Malawi. It is possible that the Technical Director and General Secretary of FAM will visit you here later tonight to brief you more concerning the press conference. They are keen to help you with your challenge.”

We talked more about the St John’s project in Mzuzu and Martha produced a list of other hospitals and missions funded by Action Aid along our route that she felt it would be a good idea to visit. We also played the two Malawians our Kick 4 Malawi song. They seemed slightly baffled by it, but were polite enough to appear interested.

“We could play it at the press conference” suggested Martha. I grinned proudly.

“Anyone for another pot of tea?” asked John.

CHAPTER 6 ROSEBUD

A sharp plaintive cry introduced me to my first Malawi morning. It was dark and cold and the chorus of cicadas hissed rhythmically outside our flimsy hotel window. The high-pitched wail rose again from the dark unknown. It was clearly coming from some kind of animal but it had an eerie humanlike quality. The possibilities ran through my head – the lonely call of a passing jackal? That was unlikely in the city. Could it be one of the many turkeys that roamed the hotel grounds? I knew turkeys gobbled but could they cry as well? Then I remembered the skinny cat that I had seen prowling earlier in the evening and my mind was settled, but as the ghostly cry sounded again I couldn't help but recall the obvious poverty of our surroundings.

The previous evening as the sun was falling we had decided to walk the half mile or so into Lilongwe's old town in an attempt to buy some bottled water from the ambiguously titled People's Supermarket – for only Lilongwe's wealthiest citizens are able to shop there. As we walked along the air was still warm and thick with the stench of rotting litter and sewage. Running alongside the dusty roads were deep ditches into which all kinds of human refuse were dumped. At night, men with torches lit fires along the ditches to burn away some of the waste. This was my first experience of a city in the developing world. The economic contrasts were striking, and as we walked past a tidy white-

bricked house with tall iron gates, we saw the American missionaries we had met on the plane waving to us from their poolside deckchairs. As we rounded the corner we passed several shoeless beggars roaming in and out of the makeshift market stalls that lined the road. Trainers, t-shirts and footballs were spread out on the ground for people to buy – a meagre selection of second hand wares that instantly brought my material wealth to the forefront of my mind; the watch on my wrist; the gold ring on my finger; my t-shirt and trainers. Judging by their tatty appearance, the majority of people in Malawi's capital owned few changes of clothing, and shoes were an obvious luxury.

The supermarket was a westernised oasis of convenience with an array of packaged foods and fresh goods. Strangely, the staff seemed to outnumber the customers. Many of them stood idly in their blue uniforms while others mopped the already clean floor. We each grabbed 4litre bottles of water from the broken refrigerator at the back of the store and headed for the checkout, but we had to return to our hotel empty handed when we realised the supermarket did not accept US Dollars. As the shop was closing, someone would have to acquire some Malawian Kwacha and return in the morning.

Back at the Korea Garden Lodge we began the long and drawn out process of filtering water for the challenge. The decision had been made by Linda to filter and treat all the water that passed the Fleming boys' lips. The murky tap water at the hotel was obviously undrinkable and so jug by jug of it was cleansed using the small hand pump filter we had brought with us. It was a long and laborious process, and even after two hours of continuous effort, we had barely succeeded in filtering 4 litres of water. The opaque liquid was then treated with four drops of iodine. Pete, drawing on his training in sports science had estimated that the two runners would need at least 10 litres of water every day, and would probably need to consume at least 3 litres each before the start of the challenge. The work needed to ensure the boys had the required amount of safe water to drink

looked pretty daunting, but as the challenge got under way, we realised that the local bottled water was not as bad as some members of the crew had at first feared. Although it tasted rotten, most of us threw caution to the wind and started swigging it after a few days, although we always ensured that the water for the runners was filtered and iodised.

After a late afternoon snooze we had decided to venture out for our evening meal. The obvious venue was the Korea Garden Restaurant – the hotel’s sister establishment just a stone’s throw away. The restaurant was completely empty. We wondered whether this was because Malawians ate at a different time of the evening or whether the western-style eateries about town were only affordable to foreign visitors. Two rather surprised looking waiters ushered us in as honoured guests. It was a hot, humid evening and dogs barked outside as we ordered our meals from the sparse menu. They took about an hour to prepare and we soon realised that the cooks in the kitchen were literally starting from scratch with our orders. We wondered whether they had yet killed the animals we were going to eat. While we waited we ordered drinks. I sat fidgeting apprehensively in my chair.

Being new to Africa, I was worried about the prospect of going down with traveller’s diarrhoea. Linda, a relatively experienced world traveller was not putting my mind at ease.

“You shouldn’t eat anything unless it’s been thoroughly cooked” she warned. “Peel it, boil it, cook it or forget it! And the meat will be pretty dodgy as well. I’m just sticking to vegetables while I’m here.” For a doctor, Linda could be an incredible hypochondriac.

My “Green Beer” had arrived. It was a bottle of Carlsberg. I was just about to take a swig when I noticed that the top of the re-bottled lager was grimy with rust and dirt. I asked for a glass, but when that arrived there were several dead insects stuck to the bottom. Already I could see that if I let my hygiene worries get the better of me I was going to be a very thirsty and hungry team

member. With the prospect of a busy day ahead of us we all resolved to eat heartily and hang the consequences. So saying a little prayer I washed down some flies with my Carlsberg and ate the small portion of sweet and sour pork that eventually arrived.

It was gone 9 by the time we wandered back to the hotel. The sky was pitch black and starry as the two security guards pulled back the huge iron doors to let us in to the fortress. Such security should have made me feel safe, but instead I felt edgy. Despite Malawi's relatively safe status, we had heard stories of western tourists getting stabbed as they walked through the old town. In any case, the fact that we were staying in such a castle of relative opulence, built and maintained by foreign money, barricading ourselves in against the squalor and poverty of the surrounding shanty-town made me feel very uneasy; as if our very presence here was in some way patronising or dishonest. It was something I was to continue to chew over as the trip progressed.

Steve and Pete headed off to bed while the rest of the crew resigned themselves to more water filtering, but at 9.30 the phone in the reception sounded and the Flemings had to be roused from their slumber. The FAM boys had arrived!

Edington Ng'Onamo was the Technical Director of the Football Association of Malawi. He was also the national team coach and as Steve squinted at him through bleary eyes, he was sure he had recognised him from the newspaper we had been given earlier in the day. For a football coach, Edington was middle aged and portly, resembling an overweight supporter in his tight football shirt. It was a Saints shirt. He grimaced as he introduced himself and shaking Steve's hand, grumbled;

"I have locked my keys in my car! I'm going to need to break in."

Steve and Pete turned to see another overweight football fan in a Man United top wrestling with the door of Edington's grey Ford Mondeo.

“Let me introduce you to my colleague” explained Edington. “This is Roosevelt Mpinganjira, he is the General Secretary of FAM.”

The man in the Man U shirt beamed and shook Steve and Pete’s hands vigorously.

“It is an honour to meet you” he said, “we have read all about your mission and the Football Association of Malawi is proud to give you its support!”

At that moment Steve’s Dad wandered sleepily across the courtyard.

“Roosevelt, let me introduce you to my father, Professor John Fleming, he is a member of our support crew for the challenge.” said Steve.

John leant forward, thrust out a hand; “Nice to meet you Rosebud.”

Steve winced and directed Pete to usher their father back to his room.

The boys spent half an hour chatting to Roosevelt and Edington at the hotel’s poolside bar. The two Malawians were evidently already well lubricated and tried to buy the boys some drinks. Steve had to explain to them that it would be unwise for them to sink too many beers on the eve of a ten marathon hike. They didn’t really seem to understand but instead laughed and joked about football and Southampton’s premiership demise. They soon explained the reason for their joviality. Three England internationals were set to visit Malawi on Monday and Edington and Roosevelt were to be their hosts for the trip. Gary Neville and Rio Ferdinand were taking a flight to Lilongwe directly after the FA Cup Final against Arsenal, and David James was to join them later in the trip.

“Would you like us to arrange a meeting with them?” asked Roosevelt.

The prospect of meeting three England players was mouth-watering – especially considering the weight of prestige they could lend to our charity campaign. It seemed almost too good to be true. The England players were on a two-week tour of Africa to promote AIDS awareness, and although they would be busy, they'd surely be happy to pose for photos to help us with promotion.

Dizzy with excitement and anticipation the Fleming boys said their goodbyes to Roosevelt and Edington and turned in for the night.

Dizzy with alcohol the FAM boys trudged back to the car-park to find their already battered company vehicle being crow-barred by a hotel orderly.

The cat wailed again, and seconds later so did my room mate John McCarthy as our alarm beeped a chilling little ditty. It was time to get up. Breakfast was served outside the main building next to the swimming pool. One of the hotel staff – Ibrahim made us omelettes underneath a colourful green and yellow parasol. He wore a brightly patterned cap and smock as well as a permanently benign smile as he served. There was plenty to eat – toast, cereal, bananas and curiously small roast potatoes which tasted delicious. Effort was obviously made to furnish guests with a European style breakfast and Steve and Pete wasted no time filling up for the day ahead as they swigged furiously from their Lucozade bottles.

It was John F's birthday and Linda and Srinu soon arrived to present him with a few cards and a gift. It was an electronic barometer. John seemed pleased with his present and held it aloft to measure the blue sky. It was already approaching 25 degrees Celsius. As we popped our malaria tablets after breakfast Steve recounted the meeting with Edington and Roosevelt. "We could be meeting Rio Ferdinand!" he announced excitedly.

“It might be quite difficult though” countered Pete, “They arrive on Monday and that’s the day we leave Lilongwe, it’s likely we will just miss them.”

“I’m a little disappointed the FA didn’t link our trips together” I said shaking my head. It seemed like a perfect opportunity missed. Three England footballers arriving in a little known African country to raise AIDS awareness just days after two football-mad Brits embark on a mammoth kickathon to raise money for an AIDS orphanage. I couldn’t get over the coincidence, but the players would undoubtedly have an extremely tight schedule to stick to, and we realised that the possibility of meeting with them was only a slight one.

At 9 we gathered outside the hotel with our day-bags and waited for Henry to arrive with the 4x4. We looked highly conspicuous in our striking red t-shirts, wrap-around-shades and painted white with sun-tan cream. Henry was late and we began to get fidgety. Steve was noted for his impatience and started to mutter to himself. The press conference was due to start at 10 and Steve wanted to get there at least half an hour before to prepare. We later realised that Africans have a very relaxed attitude to time management and if we had arrived at half past 9, there would have been no-one at the stadium to let us in anyway.

Eventually Henry arrived with his boss Mark Sprong from Land and Lake Safaris. Mark jovially introduced himself and nonchalantly announced that there was enough bottled water in the van to last for several days. The crew, who had stayed up late into the night pumping the water filter, looked at each other with mixed emotions.

Mark was a friendly thick-set South African with blonde hair and a boyish face. Like Henry, he wore a khaki shirt and shorts – typical African safari gear. He had been in the country for twenty years offering safaris across Malawi and Zambia. He had catered for other charity challenges in the past but this he said was by far the most unusual. He seemed genuinely interested in what we

were doing and enthusiastically shook our hands and shepherded us into the van. “I can’t believe you boys are going to kick a football all that way! It’s a long way to Mzuzu you know! I think it’s great what you’re doing; it’s certainly the craziest thing I’ve been involved with. I saw you in the newspaper yesterday; it’s caused quite a stir in the circles I operate in! Would you like a quick coffee at my office before we head to the stadium?”

Steve glanced at his watch. “Thanks Mark, but I don’t think we’ll have time. Action Aid said the press conference is due to start at 10.”

Mark smiled, “Ok, but I can guarantee you that we have plenty of time. People in Malawi are pretty laid back. A 10 o’clock start means that people will *start to arrive* at 10 o’clock! That’s African time!”

Steve wasn’t assured. He was itching to get started.

CHAPTER 7 **KICK OFF**

“The Fleming brothers have introduced us to a new concept” announced Roosevelt Mpinganjira, the General Secretary of FAM. “They have shown that football can be used as a tool to fight AIDS and poverty.” In front of an assembled crowd of press and TV cameras, the recognisable face of Malawian football was endorsing the Kick 4 Malawi project with an almost gushing eulogy.

We were in a large recreation room, part of Lilongwe’s premier football stadium, and home to Civo United, a team representing the Civil Service in Malawi’s part-time and sporadically organised football league. The room was dark and dingy, lit only by the lights emanating from the TV Malawi cameras that were stationed behind a square of wooden tables at the back of the press conference. At the front, Steve, Pete and their proud father sat alongside Edington and Roosevelt, who stooped towards the small, cigar-shaped microphone on the desk beneath him.

“The Football Association of Malawi is honoured to be involved with their incredible challenge.” He continued. “Kick 4 Malawi has shown us that we have a new responsibility in our role as coordinators of our national game, to promote AIDS awareness and help to ease the suffering caused by this terrible disease.” Was I hearing it right? Were we really responsible for a

national football association's change in policy? It certainly seemed so.

When Roosevelt had finished speaking he opened the floor to questions and the group of journalists seized their moment to attack.

"So why haven't FAM acted until now in the fight against HIV?" was one cynical comment.

"What are you going to do about the state of Malawi's football league?"

"What difference are you going to make?"

"How much money will you put back into the community?"

The questions came thick and fast and were laced with the venomous scepticism normally associated with the British tabloids. The sombre suited journalists had listened politely to Martha as she introduced the challenge and spoke about the ongoing work of Action Aid. They applauded warmly as the microphone was passed to Steve who talked about the aims and objectives of the Kick 4 Malawi initiative. But now the knives were out for FAM, and we began to realise why the Football Association of Malawi had been so keen to endorse our challenge. They had been vilified in the press and wanted to restore their public image. They had been accused of poor management, corruption and match fixing, and now they had an opportunity to be seen to be making a positive contribution to their nation.

"Tomorrow we welcome David James, Rio Ferdinand and Gary Neville to our country", continued Roosevelt. "They will hold a press conference here before being escorted to various AIDS projects in Malawi. This proves the commitment of FAM to highlight the problem of AIDS and raise money for good causes."

This seemed to placate the hostile audience, but questions continued to come without reservation; “How much of your own money have you put into these causes?” “What will the English players do for Malawian football?” It felt like our press conference had been hijacked by journalists intent on exposing FAM’s past underachievement, but fortunately Martha interrupted to bring a halt to the proceedings and usher everyone outside for a drinks reception before the start of the challenge. She had brought her young children along – two boys who had sat patiently through the half-hour press conference in their best Sunday suits. They now scurried past the conference table and out into the bright sunlight beyond the double doors.

It was about 11 o’clock and the sun had reached its zenith in the sky. In a small garden behind the stadium, crisps and ice cold fizzy drinks were being shared among the team and guests, while Pete and Steve swigged nervously from their pre-prepared Lucozade bottles. Steve was taken to one-side by a radio producer and asked to do an interview into an old wand microphone that Terry Wogan may well have used on Blankety Blank. Meanwhile Pete was introduced to a young man in an Arsenal kit who introduced himself as Myessa – the national radio DJ that Pete had been in e-mail contact with for several months. Myessa wished the brothers every success and asked for a copy of the Kick 4 Malawi song. He said he would play it on his show every day until the end of the challenge. I wandered for a split second whether the song would take off in Malawi. Was there a Malawi Top of the Pops? I imagined being whisked into a dusty TV studio at the end of the challenge to record an impromptu rendition on Pete’s battered old acoustic guitar we had brought with us. Would the locals be singing my tune when we arrived tired and dirty in Mzuzu to a celebrity welcome? It was all a ludicrous pipe dream.

For now, I had to concentrate on my designated task; getting as many interviews on my small hand-held camcorder as possible. As official documenter of the trip, it was my job to keep

a visual, as well as written record of every moment of the boys' challenge – from arrival in Lilongwe, until our departure in thirteen days time. I was not doing a particularly good job. So far, I had managed just a handful of shaky interviews with Steve and Pete and the other crew members. Now, with a perfect opportunity to mix with the movers and shakers of Malawian football and media, I found myself interviewing the groundsman. His name was Justice, and he was a lively and engaging interviewee, but perhaps not quite the calibre of celebrity guest I should have been cornering. I was a reluctant journalist and felt more comfortable letting the adventure unfold around me rather than jumping into the thick of things, waving microphones into people's faces.

"It is a crazy thing for your friends to be doing!" laughed the fat faced groundsman jovially. "Where are you kicking the ball to?"

"Mzuzu" I replied with a smile.

Justice belly-laughed again and shaking his head said "You English are crazy! Mzuzu? In this heat? Across those hills? You will need good fortune my friends! Ha Ha!" He licked his lips ponderously and then frowned, "Will you be in the Guinness Book?" He enquired.

I tried to explain that the Guinness Book of Records require feats of endurance to be continuous, therefore for our challenge to register, the boys would have to kick a football all the way to Mzuzu without a break, a near impossible task. Justice walked away shaking his head and muttering to himself "It should be in the Guinness Book."

Pete looked across to Steve who had finished his radio interview abruptly. It was nearly mid day and the boys wanted to begin the challenge before the heat could sap their strength. Pete had been swigging Lucozade for the last two hours, and was buzzing with a potent mixture of adrenaline, and sugary liquid.

“I bet you can’t wait to go” I grinned at Pete.

“Yeah, I’m bursting” he replied, “I hope there are plenty of trees along the route!”

As kick-off time approached the party walked through a white-washed archway into the stadium. Down below, the pitch looked far from lush. It was bumpy, brown and uneven, but I turned to Justice and lied unashamedly;

“Nice pitch”

The terraced stands looked bare and empty as the Kick 4 Malawi team and the assembled media milled about on the patchy grass. It was a far cry from what I had envisioned when Steve first told me of the challenge. In my mind there had been thousands of excited football fans chanting our names, and a live video link back to Gary Lineker in the studio. Although the reality was less glamorous, I could hardly conceal my excitement. Here we were in a remote African country about to attempt something that had never been done before, and at least the Malawian press seemed interested.

The TV cameras focussed on Steve and Pete doing keepy-ups in the centre circle. Roosevelt joined them for the warm up. He seemed tentative as he kicked the ball back to the boys.

“Do you play much any more?” asked Steve.

“Not since my injury” replied Roosevelt pointing at his left leg. The boys followed his finger to a gruesome looking scar running down the side of his left shin. “It happened on this pitch ten years ago. It was a bad tackle that finished my career.” The operation to fix his shattered fibula had left his leg looking red and misshapen. He looked clearly reticent about joining in any physical activity.

There was time for one last TV interview before Roosevelt gingerly kicked the ball from the centre spot and Steve and Pete were cheered on their way. The challenge had begun and the

boys dribbled and passed the ball between them as they ran out of the stadium towards the main road. Caught up in the excitement of the moment I had forgotten to ask a salient question; did the boys actually know the way to Mzuzu?

CHAPTER 8 PANIC ON THE STREETS OF LILONGWE

Steve's heart was pounding as he ran back through the white-washed archway into the stadium car-park. His mouth felt suddenly dry and the adrenaline of the moment had left him shockingly breathless and confused. As he approached the main road his mind went blank. It was difficult to dribble a football and concentrate on directions at the same time, especially with a crowd of journalists and photographers in hot pursuit. In fact, some were now overtaking him, jockeying for the best "action" shots of the two kick-runners. A red Toyota van with a cameraman leaning precariously out of the window sped by, nearly running over the ball and puncturing the media spectacle. Pete instinctively followed the TV van out of the stadium as it turned right. The boys were running hard in the hot sunshine, spurred on by the shouts of support and the soft sniping sound of flashing cameras. The solitary hours of pounding quiet country lanes back home may have conditioned their bodies, but mentally, they were not prepared for the drama of this moment. The culmination of months of training was precipitated in a release of energy and emotion as they both raced along the centre of the road, passing the ball between them with precision and intent.

As the road curved northwards and steepened, Steve put his head down and increased his speed. Realising what was happening, Pete called out;

“This is crazy, slow down! We’ve got to pace ourselves!”

Steve managed to shake off his tunnel vision and shortened his stride length accordingly, but the pounding in his chest continued and every charged muscle fibre in his body was screaming at him to sprint.

The boys were now running through the business heart of the new town centre, where Lilongwe’s only cluster of white office blocks provide some shaded relief from the relentless sun. There seemed to be a healthy amount of people lining the roadside and for a second, Pete was elated that so many had come to support them. But as they climbed Kamuzu Procession Road towards Capital Hill, the crowd seemed to be taking little or no interest in the two white men in red t-shirts, kicking a ball along the road. In fact, most were looking the other way. Suddenly a cheer went up from the crowd and Pete smiled to himself “they’ve seen us at last!” only to look up at a four-poster bed on coasters hurtling towards them at high speed!

The boys managed to scramble onto the grassy verge as the winners of the Lilongwe Hospital Bed-Race trundled towards their finishing line and glory. It seemed that Kick 4 Malawi was not the only charity challenge hitting the streets of Lilongwe that day. The boys looked at each other and laughed.

“Well I wasn’t expecting that!” said Steve with a grin.

Back at the stadium I fiddled with my camera and checked that I’d brought enough batteries with me to last the day, while the other crew members piled into the Toyota. The cream coloured 4x4 was to be our home for the next 10 days and without the clutter of our luggage the Landcruiser felt reasonably comfortable and spacious. Henry was industriously lifting off the

heavy viewing-roof to allow me to get some good overhead shots of the lads from the van. The Bandis were busy mixing drinks for the runners, making sure that iodine drops purified all the liquid that went into their systems. I sipped impatiently from my little bottle of water I had transferred straight from one of the bigger containers in the boot of the van. It had an after-taste somewhat akin to rotten vegetables.

Mark Sprong wandered over to the van and beamed;

“Well guys, I suppose you should be on your way, otherwise you might lose them! Have you sorted out all the logistics? How are you going to follow the runners?”

It was certainly a valid question. Steve had not really put much thought into the practicalities faced by the support crew, but luckily Mr Practical himself, John McCarthy had been pondering it for some time.

“I think we should go ahead of the runners and keep them refreshed at 5 mile intervals. We’ll need to keep in close contact with the boys in case anything goes wrong.”

“Well, we could organise some radios and bikes for you, but to be honest, I think you will need to be pretty close to the runners at all times.” Replied Mark. “The roads in Malawi are quite dangerous and Henry needs to be on hand to deal with any queries from the authorities”

Mark had a good point. Statistically, there were more road fatalities per capita in Malawi than anywhere else in the world and Steve and Pete would be extremely vulnerable as they dribbled the ball along the bumpy roadside. In addition, outside of the town centres, there were not always pathways running parallel to the road. The boys would have to run in the middle of the highway. No-one really knew what to expect as nobody had undertaken such a task before, but I felt a little surprised and uneasy that we were talking about such important things now. Surely this should have been planned already.

“Won’t the van overheat if we just crawl along behind the runners?” chipped in John F.

“You’d be surprised” smiled Mark. “These beasts are pretty sturdy. They’re designed for safaris – crawling behind wildlife for hours at a time. It’s what they’re built to do! Anyway, stick pretty close to the runners today Henry, and if you guys want to change anything, just let us know tonight. We’ll do anything we can to help out. Good luck!”

With a wave Mark re-joined his wife and daughters as they prepared to follow the entourage of vehicles escorting the Flemings out of the city. The warmth and goodwill demonstrated by Mark was typical of everyone we had met in Lilongwe and as we pulled out of the stadium gates we felt excited to be exploring this beautiful yet beleaguered nation.

Meanwhile, about a mile ahead of us Steve and Pete were approaching a large grassy roundabout. There was a choice of directions and without breaking stride Steve motioned to a local woman in a colourful patterned dress “Mzuzu?” he enquired, pointing at the road that stretched out from the first exit. The woman laughed and threw a hand in the same direction.

“Ah yes, Mzuzu that way!”

“Thanks” said Steve with a smile, the sweat beginning to trickle from his brow and accumulate in patches on his back and chest. It is a common misconception that sweating is a sign of unfit. In fact, sweating is a vital process that enables the body to cool and conserve energy. The fitter you become, the more efficiently your body reacts to exercise, and consequently, the more you sweat.

The Flemings had run just over a mile and were starting to drip with perspiration as they turned onto the M1. This was Malawi’s main road, a single lane highway that bisects the country from Karonga in the North to Blantyre in the south. Luckily for

the boys, the road is fairly well maintained and had been completely re-laid in 1994 as part of the government's extensive public works programme. Outside of the city however, the road is bumpy and potholed due to erosion, the result of Africa's extreme seasons. Torrential downpours during the rainy months wash away the soft verges so that the roadside is often several inches lower than the tarred surface, and this was to prove problematic for the boys later in the challenge.

But for now, as our Land Cruiser approached the entourage of TV cameras and well wishers, Steve and Pete were still running in the centre of the road kicking the ball between them. They were being shepherded along by two police vehicles that we presumed had been informed of the challenge and were re-organising the traffic so that the runners had a degree of protection. Cars overtaking the convoy honked their support (or annoyance – we were never quite sure which) and the brothers waved serenely as if they were out on a leisurely jog around the block. We were all surprised at how much distance they had covered in the 10 minutes since kick-off. As Henry raced to catch up with them, I had to steady myself. With my torso poking through the sun-roof, one hand trying to film and the other holding onto my hat as we sped along the bumpy road, I was buffeted against the metal sides of the van and had to jam my legs between two seats to avoid cracking a rib.

"There they are!" I announced proudly to the camera. "The Fleming boys, showing off their skills, passing the ball expertly..."

No sooner had the words passed my lips when Steve scuffed the football horribly into oncoming traffic. Pete ran across the road to retrieve it and was nearly flattened by a truck which had to brake sharply.

From that moment on I decided not to add a running commentary to my filming and the boys decided it would be safer to run along a path that continued parallel to the road.

We were now approaching the outskirts of the city and the busy concrete shanties had given way to quiet leafy suburbs. There were many people travelling along the path that led back into the heart of Lilongwe. Women dressed in their traditional coloured chitenga sarongs, carrying baskets of food to sell in the roadside markets, and men balancing huge bundles of firewood miraculously on their heads. At the junctions between roads, groups of people accumulated to talk and chew sugar cane, while men cooked a variety of meats on makeshift barbecues called *braai*. This was your average weekend entertainment for the local inhabitants of Lilongwe, but on this particular Saturday, the sight of two white men dressed in striking sports gear, kicking a football along the roadside with a convoy of TV crews in hot pursuit was a curiosity that had to be investigated. Many people shouted out in their native Chichewa while others just smiled and waved. Every congregation we passed seemed to have an old battery operated radio blaring from a wooden stand, and it was evidence that many people were aware of the Kick 4 Malawi challenge. Those who had heard about us shouted encouragement in English and held out hands to be shaken or hi-fived as Pete and Steve ran past.

A few people however seemed genuinely confused by our presence and wanted to know what was happening. They called out “*Dzina lanu ndani?*” (what is your name?) and “*Mukupita kuti?*” (where are you going?) as they ran beside the van. On these occasions Henry grinned at them and tried to explain exactly what was going on.

“*Ndikupita ku Mzuzul!*” “We’re going to Mzuzul!” he exclaimed, extrapolating details about the challenge, at which the enquirer would either reel away scratching their head and exclaiming “*sindikumva!*” (I don’t understand) or burst into laughter and wish us a *bwena ulendo* (good journey). One man, obviously drunk and egged on by his friends staggered after the boys and demanded;

“Give me your ball!”

We put the man’s abruptness down to his alcohol consumption, but when the incident was repeated further along the road, we began to realise a cultural misunderstanding. Henry shed some light on the matter;

“He does not mean to be rude, he just doesn’t know very much English and there is no word in Chichewa for please. He probably just wanted the boys to stop and play a game.”

It began to dawn on us that actually we were the ones appearing rude. In Malawian culture it is polite to stop and talk to those you pass on the road. The nature of our challenge meant that we could rarely afford to stop for more than a few seconds to chat. As a result we made a point of waving manically at everyone we saw and soon learned some local greetings; “*Moni*” (Hello) and “*wawa*” (Hi!) which the majority of people we passed seemed delighted to reciprocate.

After about 4 miles on the road, with the city of Lilongwe stretched out behind us, Pete decided to come into the van for a rest and take on valuable fluids. He had resolved that the most economic way for the boys to cover the distance from now on was for them to run in relay at two mile intervals. This gave them enough time in the van to recover physically while the other was out on the road. To think that originally the boys had planned to cover the complete distance together didn’t bear thinking about. It would still be a monumental feat for each to run the equivalent of a half marathon every day for ten days.

While Pete was having a breather, Steve was ploughing on ahead. John McCarthy became the first of the support crew to venture out onto the road, joining his son-in-law as he conquered a series of short hills on the outskirts of the capital. He lasted about a mile before clambering back into the van, panting like a dog. “Phew, that was tough, it’s hot out there!” he reasoned, but we were all impressed at how he’d managed to keep up with Steve, who was still dribbling the ball at a ridiculously fast pace.

Pete, sitting in the front seat of the Toyota asked Henry if he could reset the tachometer on his dashboard to zero so that the boys would know when to swap over. From now on as the van crawled slowly behind the runner in second gear, its hazard lights flashing, Henry was to keep an eye on how many kilometres the entourage had travelled, and at intervals of 3.2 km (the equivalent of two miles) the Land Cruiser would speed ahead of the runner and come to a stop to indicate the next change over point. It was a system that was to work well throughout the challenge and gave the boys a rhythm and pace to their running.

Soon it was Steve's turn for a well earned rest. He had been running for almost 6 miles in the heat of the day and looked exhausted. "Yeah, my knee is hurting a little bit" he grimaced. Linda passed him a tube of Ibuprophen gel to ease the pain. It was certainly a worrying sign so early on in the challenge.

"You're running too fast! Just pace yourself", said Pete as he hopped out of the van and broke into a warm up run to the bushes to relieve his bladder.

The sun was now sliding behind a blanket of cloud, ushered across the sky by a blustery wind that caused a sudden drop in temperature. It was an ideal opportunity for me to stretch my legs and run the next two miles with Pete. I handed the small JVC camera to Steve and set out at a gentle pace along the dust path that separated the road from a thick grove of acacia trees. It felt good to be finally out on the road. I desperately wanted to run the whole distance, and had looked on jealously when Steve and Pete had kicked off their adventure back at Civo Stadium. But realistically, I knew I wasn't anywhere near fit enough to complete it. I remembered how I'd felt after finishing 13 miles of the Great North Run. I was completely spent and could barely walk for a week. The Fleming brothers were covering the same mileage every day for 10 days. My legs just were not up to the task. But I was determined to run at least 5 miles every day in an attempt to get fit and gain a feel for the magnitude of the task

facing the Flemings. It was also good to give them some company out on the road.

As luck would have it, the first two mile stretch that I had chosen to run was a smooth progression of inclines that were easy on my legs, but even so, running two miles without stopping was not something my body was used to. Another thing making it easier was the fact that several children had started to run with us. They excitedly called for the ball and skilfully passed it between their bare feet as they ran. One of the children we discovered was the son of Ken Matakenya, our Action Aid representative who was travelling alongside us in support. We rewarded the kids' efforts with sweets dished out by Steve through the window of the van.

Every time we passed a local walking towards us on the path we were greeted with smiles and waves. The children with us giggled at our cheesy attempts to say hello in Chichewa. It felt exhilarating to be a part of a challenge that was bringing joy and excitement to so many.

After approximately 18 minutes the Land Cruiser accelerated in front of us and came to a stop. It was not before time for me. My back was drenched in sweat and my mouth felt as dusty as my newly broken in trainers. I collapsed in the van and took on board some refreshment. It didn't seem like any time had past before it was Pete's turn again to run. He had recovered and looked fresh and ready to go. I was still breathing heavily and decided wisely to stay inside the van and continue filming.

As I recovered and Pete loped along in the distance, a group of young women excitedly approached the side of the van. Some of the women held babies in their arms or cocooned in tight slings across their backs. They laughed and chattered, taking bites from sugar cane they were carrying as Henry explained our challenge to them. Giggling nervously they each told us their names as they shook our hands. Henry relayed that some of the ladies had asked whether we had anything to give them. He

explained that people living alongside the highway often asked foreign travellers for hand-outs. It wasn't considered begging as such, more like opportunism. This was one of the world's poorest countries, and the rural dwellers outside the capital city were obliged to keep a lookout for ways to supplement their meagre incomes. It was purely a matter of survival.

Even items that we would consider rubbish were highly sought after. Plastic containers were valuable, especially just after the rainy season, so we let the women have two of the 5 litre bottles we had emptied. Later we were to see many such plastic bottles lined up for sale at various markets. Apart from these useful containers, all we had to give away were sweets. It was a frustrating irony that we had come all this way having raised money for the people of Malawi, and yet there was practically very little we could do to help the majority of those we met along our journey to the orphanage. And yet the young women seemed genuinely thrilled at being presented with lollies. It was obviously a rare treat for these sweet-toothed girls, many of whom, even the ones with babies, did not seem much older than children themselves.

After I had ventured out for a second run, this time with Steve who had acquired an entourage of children, we reached the edge of a large plateau, beyond which stood the white building that we recognised from the day before. We had reached Kamuzu International Airport.

We pushed on through the town of Lumbadze, a small accumulation of houses that had grown to accommodate the 500 or so airport workers. The town was typical of the roadside settlements we were to encounter along the M1. There were a few white-washed concrete buildings with faded red Coca Cola signs that functioned as poorly stocked grocery stores. More common were the undertakers and coffin makers that lined the roadsides telling the grim reality behind all those smiling faces.

The curiously named Energy Coffins was the largest franchise we encountered in the rural areas of Malawi.

As Steve chugged uphill through Lumbadze he passed a local bar and heard drunken yet remarkably pitch perfect singing emanate from inside. Beyond Lumbadze the terrain levelled out and we passed several more small settlements before entering a scrubland plain with the sun beginning to descend up ahead.

At about three o'clock, our travelling entourage began to head back to the city. First to go were the cameramen and journalists who returned content they had a story for their newspapers. Then the Sprong family wished us well and promised to make us a Kick 4 Malawi banner for the side of the 4x4. We thanked Mark for his generous help and decided we would probably not need bicycles or radios for the remainder of the trip. In making that decision we were relying on the durability of Land and Lakes' safari vehicle and the ability of its driver, but Henry was proving more than capable and the sturdy van had crawled along for three hours in the scorching temperatures without overheating.

Next to go were Roosevelt and Edington from the Football Association, and Ken Matakenya from Action Aid. They shook our hands in turn and introduced us to a player from the national team who had joined them on the outskirts of the city. They were all heading back to a bar in Lilongwe in time for the F.A.Cup Final and had bet a small fortune on Manchester United to sneak a victory.

The thought of making it back to the hotel in time to watch the last few minutes of the Cup Final was enough to spur the brothers on as they progressed out of the wooded groves on the edge of Lilongwe into the grassy wilderness that extended towards the northern hills. The lack of trees in this region was a cause of consternation for Linda, who was understandably reluctant to relieve herself at the side of the road like the rest of the crew. Chaperoned by husband Srin, she was able to find a

suitable spot while the other team members piled out of the van to stretch their legs and join Pete and Steve on the final mile of their first marathon.

Approaching the van Pete slowed down to take a well earned rest and introduce a collection of new friends; Antoine, Christophe, Ceasar and Alexander. They had joined Pete for his two mile stretch and were apparently knowledgeable about the challenge, having heard about it on radio that morning. They seemed proud to have joined in, but like teenagers the world over, tried to conceal their excitement with a feigned nonchalant exterior. Despite the temperature, Christophe was wearing a woollen beanie hat which we discovered was the must-have fashion accessory for teenagers in Malawi. He was also sporting a Brazil football top which Pete acknowledged by calling him Renaldo as he shook his hand warmly and thanked the boys for their support.

The air cooled and the sun shimmered through the heat haze as it approached the horizon. We ambled along the road seemingly miles from any habitation when the beautiful melodic sound of a church choir, practising for the following morning's service, drifted across on the breeze. It had been an incredible day and we were all amazed at how far we had travelled. Behind us the shanty towns of Lilongwe were barely visible beyond a series of ridges. Ahead of us the road approached another small village and we soon came to a dusty football pitch where an energetic game was taking place. It seemed as good a place as any to stop.

CHAPTER 9 PINK PYJAMAS

The most annoying sound in the world once again spurred me into action. I grappled with my mosquito net in a desperate attempt to hurl John McCarthy's alarm clock into the hotel swimming pool.

"That's the quickest you've moved in three days" remarked John. He never missed an opportunity for sarcasm.

"That is a horrible sound" I grumbled, not rising to the bait. I laid back and recalled the reason for the burning sensation that was now swimming around in my bowels.

"That curry was a bad idea" I mumbled.

"Well we did wonder why you went for the hottest one on the menu!" countered John, his cheerfulness beginning to grate.

The previous evening we had made it back to the hotel in time to watch the last stages of what had apparently been a rather dull and uneventful Cup Final. Forgetting ourselves, we had rushed to the TV set, leaving Henry sitting glumly in the 4x4. Eventually he plucked up enough courage to humbly ask whether he could watch the remainder of the game with us. We hadn't even given it a thought, Henry was an instant hit. To us, he was already a fully fledged member of the team. We apologised for our lack of manners and invited him in to watch the game, which drifted into extra time and then penalties.

Jens Lehman's save from Paul Scholes and Patrick Viera's decisive penalty with his last kick for the club, brought about victory for Arsenal and the certainty of financial loss for Roosevelt and Edington of the Malawian FA. After the match, defeated finalists Rio Ferdinand and Gary Neville were travelling straight from the Manchester United dressing room and flying out to Malawi. It didn't seem possible that they would be rubbing shoulders with Roosevelt and Eddington at the Civo Stadium in just 24 hours.

After the game we invited Henry to join us for dinner and asked whether he could recommend any good restaurants. Without hesitation Henry drove us to Modhi's Indian restaurant in the heart of the old town, but seemed rather shy to accept our invitation to dine with us. We realised that eating out in the tourist locations of the capital was probably unaffordable for the majority of Malawians, so we insisted that the meal would be on us, as a thank-you for his skills with the van and as an interpreter. After some persuasion he accepted graciously with a trademark laugh. Modhi's, may have been a larger restaurant than the Korean Garden, but was equally slow when it came to serving. Once ordered, our meals took well over an hour to arrive.

And now, the morning after, the Extra Spicy Hot Madras was not looking like the wisest choice from the menu. But after another hearty breakfast of fried potatoes, toast, omelettes and bananas, any rumblings of complaint from my stomach were well forgotten as we gathered strength for Day Two of the challenge.

A more disconcerting occurrence was the bevy of security guards that were now roaming the grounds of the hotel wielding hefty baseball bats. During the night there had been a disturbance outside the barbed wire gates that protected the relative oasis of opulence. Aggressive voices had been heard, a woman screamed, an argument had ensued. We could only speculate as to what had happened. Perhaps someone had been caught scaling the hotel walls, or an unhappy guest refused late

entry. Whatever the commotion, the consequence was a visible security presence that was more intimidating than reassuring for the remaining guests.

Henry arrived promptly at 7am and we once again loaded up the van with everything we would need for another exhausting day on the road. Cameras, medical equipment, Lucozade powder, snacks and huge amounts of water. The drive to the day's starting point was a real eye-opener. John Mac decided he was going to film the journey on his hand-held camera but ran out of tape. It took us 35 minutes to drive northwards out of Lilongwe, past the relatively modern airport with its commuter town of Lumbadze, out into the rural plains of central Malawi where we passed fewer and fewer signs of human habitation. It was impressive to think that the brothers had run all this way on the first day of their epic challenge; 27 miles in total.

But the exuberance of the first day was over. Without the TV crews or media presence to swell the adrenaline, and fewer supporters to spur them on, there was only the prospect of hard work and a long, dusty road stretching out with the unknown adventure ahead of them.

Beside the simple whitewashed church where we had stopped the previous evening, Steve was massaging his knee and Pete completed some warm up stretches before the count down. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 go! Pete instantly resumed his metronomic pace, kicking the ball with every fourth step and keeping his head down and shoulders relaxed. It was 7.40 and there was enough cloud cover for it to be deemed cool, even a little chilly as he loped on into the distance.

Almost immediately he hit an obstacle. Coming at him along the grassy roadside verge was a herdsman driving 25 head of cattle. Pete remembered his previous encounter with cows and deftly dribbled in between his cloven hoofed opponents while the perplexed looking herdsman puzzled over the surreal scene.

Once past the oxen, Pete's progress took him out into the wilderness as the sun began protruding through the clouds. We passed small communities clinging limpet-like to the roadside, eking out a meagre living from those who passed along Malawi's main commercial artery. Beyond the roadside we could see clusters of thatched rondavels isolated like islands across the course scrubland. The people who lived in these tiny villages were scratching out a different, yet equally precarious existence. The land here was poor for farming, and the lack of irrigation meant that the spring downpours went largely to waste, flushing the nutrients from the soil and leaving it barren. The wealthier inhabitants of the rural villages tended goats or cultivated small plots of land to grow Malawi nuts or mealy maize which we often saw drying by the roadside. This was a simple and occasionally desperate way of life that had endured in this part of the Great Rift Valley for centuries.

Long before the existence of Malawi itself, this land had been tilled and tended in much the same way, although centuries ago there was a far more lucrative trade available for the local tribesmen to cash in on. Vast herds of elephants roamed these plains, providing a plentiful source of ivory to be sold to the European and Arab merchants, who by the early 17th century had infiltrated the south of the region. The ivory trade formed a basis for several kingdoms to prosper in this area, and one such, the Maravi Kingdom, was nearly 300 years later to give its name to the newly independent country of Malawi.

Now as we ambled along in the 4x4 with its hazard lights tick-tocking above the gentle hum of the engine, it felt like we were in a time machine journeying back through this ancient landscape. I could almost imagine the great herds of elephants trumpeting in the distance while brave Maravi warriors sharpened their spears. It must have been quite a sight for the first Europeans to have witnessed. In fact, the very first European eyes to rest on this

particular landscape were owned by a Portuguese tradesman and explorer; Gaspar Boccaro. In 1616 Boccaro embarked on a thousand mile trek through the region, not with a football, but with a blank map which he filled in along the way, making notes of all the impressive features like the Great Lake and the Shire River. Evidently his employers weren't overly impressed with his map drawing skills because the Portuguese decided not to settle in the region. Inevitably however, Portugal eventually did come to dominate trade in the area.

The Maravi kingdom and tribes in the surrounding hills had been doing business with the powerful Shona Kingdom of Great Zimbabwe for centuries, and it wasn't long before the White Man, motivated inexorably by greed, pushed his nose and guns into African trade and political affairs for the first time. Soon the Shona civilization, with its bejewelled cities and seemingly endless resources of gold, was being undermined and dismantled through fair means and foul as Portuguese and Arabic traders spread their influence and flexed their superior muscles. Actually, it was probably the guns that did it. Men were sent north to search for the legendary King Solomon's Mines – the supposed source of Zimbabwe's wealth, while opportunists on the coast established the port of Sofala to transport gold and ivory to the European mainland, meanwhile making sure that the rival African port of Kilwa nearby was razed to the ground.

It is interesting to note that the Europeans didn't have it all their own way. The Maravi Kingdom was feared and respected by the Portuguese who once pleaded with King Masulu to send 4000 of his warriors to help quell a rebellion in Mwene Matupa. The resulting assistance helped to cement a lucrative alliance and by 1650, the Maravi Empire had spread right to the coast. But it wasn't to last. This was to be a kind of last hurrah for the people of this region, an economic and political zenith that was never to be repeated. Soon the elephants and gold were disappearing, and the great Maravian Kingdom dissipated into smaller, less powerful factions that could not compete with European

expansion. On the horizon, a century of devastating and brutal change lay in wait for the people of what is now Malawi.

The imaginary elephants were now leisurely exiting stage left from my day-dream. In truth, I was a little puzzled that we hadn't seen any significant wildlife since our arrival. For anyone who has never been to Africa but has access to a television, you may have the impression, as I did, that the continent is teeming with wildlife. When planning the challenge, Steve and I had preoccupied ourselves for hours thinking about the practicalities of what would happen if we were attacked by a pride of lions or stampeding wildebeest. We actually had no idea of what to expect in the way of flora and fauna. Now three days in, we had witnessed the odd scrawny goat and a herd of pretty beefy, but seemingly docile oxen. There were however, plenty of birds about, and Henry would stop the van at every opportunity to point out different species. But if there were any leopards or lions in the vicinity, they were certainly keeping a low profile. In fact, even if there were any meat-eating predators on the prowl, there weren't exactly multitudes of leaping gazelles for them to lunch on either.

It was a Sunday and Malawians are a church going people. As we approached the small town of Mponella, we passed families on their way to worship. The richer ones wore brightly polished shoes. The men, beginning to sweat in stifling three piece suits led their wives, appearing elegant and exotic in their patterned chitengas. Most folks however were without shoes. Their clothes were patched up and worn, despite being kept for best. It made me think of the poor widow in St. Mark's Gospel who offered just a few coins at the temple. Jesus had commended her for giving out of her poverty. These people, arriving at church in the best of what they had, were giving out of their poverty. Some had walked several miles to be there. I thought about my own faith. My own commitment to the church services I stumbled out

of bed to attend in my tatty jeans and t-shirt. My three suits were always left hanging in my cupboard ready for work; kept for best.

Pete was back on the road as we passed through the elongated town which clung to the highway like a drop of rain on a washing line. His progress as ever, had been steady, but he stopped his run to make an unusual acquaintance – he had seen a white face coming towards him. Ahmed had waved at him enthusiastically from across the road and Pete felt obliged to stop and chat. He was an Algerian who was working in Mponella with a mission group from Canada. He said that he'd been looking out for Pete and Steve all morning. Having listened to reports on the radio, he knew all about our challenge and was expecting us to reach Mponella some time that day. Pete was delighted. He'd met his first fan.

Ahmed was a voluntary worker for one of the many mission maintained projects in Mponella. We were due to visit one of them on Day Three of the challenge, but here we were passing it on Day Two. As Pete trotted past a dusty sign for the Mponella Medi Centre, I felt very strongly that we should stop and call in at the project a day earlier than planned. Martha had taken the trouble to arrange the visit and the children there were probably keen to see us. Steve however, was impassive. He wanted to keep going and argued that it would be awkward to turn up unannounced, especially as most of the volunteers would probably be at church. We resolved that if we had time we would try to visit on our way back to Lilongwe later that day, but we never did. It was a shame not to have made the most of the opportunity to see the work of mission projects in rural areas such as Mponella, but the reality was we had to focus on our own objectives. We had a ball to kick and a schedule to stick to. That was our reason for being there, but I will always regret not spending more time with children like the ones our little endeavour was seeking to help.

As we passed through Mponella we could hear melodic choruses resounding from several churches. Some were no more than ramshackle buildings but a few were beautifully whitewashed chapels with small Victorian spires, built and maintained by the many Episcopal Church missions in the area. We also passed several mosques in Mponella, highlighting the fact that the Christian Church did not have a monopoly on the houses of religious worship in Malawi. Although the country's Moslem population is largely confined to the Yao tribe who live along the Lake shore, 12% of Malawians are Islamic, including the former President Bakili Muluzi (more of him later) and, unusually for an African country, the two religions seem to cohabit with the minimum of fuss. There is little religious tension in Malawi.

It was nearly 9 o'clock and time for me to stretch my legs. I joined Steve for the two miles between the roadside towns of Mponella and Mdisi. The verge was dusty red and potholed. The relentless spring rains compacting the soil into a firm surface that was hard going on the knees. Concentration was needed to avoid the bumps and ditches that could easily turn an ankle. It was now mid-morning and the sun was hot and humid in the sky. I could see that Steve was flagging a little so decided to pull him along like a pacemaker. I was feeling quite fresh and despite the sun, was enjoying my jog. But then again, I didn't have thirteen miles in my legs from the day before, or indeed have to control a football in front of me every few paces. This was Steve's second run of the day and worryingly, we could see him grimacing through the pain. His knee, encased in a white support that was slowly turning orange with dust from the path, was still a cause for concern. I tried to make conversation to take his mind off the discomfort. This seemed to work but every now and again, the distraction of talking caused him to miss-kick the ball into the thick long grass to our left. Steve would then have to hack it out like a golf shot from the rough back onto the fairway.

We chatted about everything. How well the challenge was going so far, the friendliness of the people, the countryside and wildlife (or lack of it). We passed several people along the path, each time looking up from our intense conversation and giving a smile, a wave and a “wa” as we ran by. It struck me how silly we must have appeared – two young men, kicking a football along a main road, dressed wholly incongruously in our shades and sun hats. Many of the people we passed carried expressions half way between amusement and amazement.

In what seemed like no time at all, we had finished the two mile stretch. Sweating profusely and breathing heavily, I settled into the back of the van and took a well earned swig of water, relieved to be in the shade. I could now look forward to a prolonged stint of inactivity, but Steve, who had hopped in the front seat next to Henry, had just 8 minutes or so to take on board food, water and more Ibuprophen, before he was back on the road again. I didn’t envy him. In front of the van, Pete paced it out into the distance with Srini for company.

Srini only usually ran one 2 mile stint per day. He wasn’t too keen on it. But he was a compact and efficient little runner and soon acquired the nickname “The Unit”. After his daily run he would clamber back into the van with a broad smile across his face and sweat pouring from his forehead. He told us in his quiet, jovial way that running in this heat wasn’t really for him as he had a condition that affected his sweat glands and made him perspire almost constantly. Despite this, it was obvious that Srini was loving every minute of the trip and wanted improve his fitness levels as well.

In Mdisi Pete chatted to an Assemblies of God Pastor who was so excited about our passing that he ran out of his church to greet us. He had also heard about our challenge on Malawi radio. Despite the fact that most people were either on their way to or from a church service, there still seemed to be plenty of commercial activity going on in Mdisi on the Sabbath. The

makeshift barbeques we had witnessed the day before had been fired up under rickety shacks by the roadside and a bicycle repair man was spread-eagled on the verge, hammering away at one of the old steel framed bikes he had around about him. He was quite literally in the recycling business.

Bicycles are an important commodity in Malawi and on this Sunday we saw scores of people pedalling to and from the various small towns along the highway, most on single gear boneshakers which creaked rhythmically as they ghosted by. It was good to see the repair man with his pile of rusty business to get through. We don't seem to have repair men any more. If something breaks down, we just get rid of it. TV's, bikes, washing machines, relationships... if we can't fix them ourselves, we scrap them. What's more, we're so used to thinking about things in terms of their shelf-life; we don't even believe anything *can* be fixed once it breaks. I think the phrase is "built in obsolescence". There's a sense that our "throwaway society" has produced an apathy that has pervaded our psyche and made us lazy. In Malawi, there's no such thing as "beyond economical repair". If you can't fix something, well then you go without. This must force people to be more appreciative of the little they have. They have to be resourceful, clever, and show ingenuity with the use of their limited material possessions. There's something positive about that.

In Mdisi Pete once more became the Pied Piper. A group of young children began to trail behind him as he dribbled out of the town. He had met them when passing a large redbrick Pentecostal Church. The door was open and the mellifluous sound of an African choir once again wafted across to the roadside. Pete was very tempted to go inside, but realising the commotion that he would have caused, instead dawdled in the forecourt and began knocking the ball around with some of the Sunday school kids that were waiting there.

After a couple of minutes Pete waved goodbye to the children, but they took this as an encouragement to follow and swarmed around him as he started to jog, whooping and laughing with joy. It was great to see them having so much fun. One poor lad was struggling to keep up, as he was labouring with a bucket that was almost bigger than he was. Steve called across to his brother from the van. "Pete, what's in the bucket?" Pete checked his run and peered inside,

"It looks like that Chicken Madras Dave had last night."

After about a mile and a half, the young children were still running with Pete and we became quite concerned for their welfare. Would they be able to find their way back? Would they be safe playing next to the main road? We didn't want them to miss church or get lost. Feeling an urge of irresponsibility, Pete upped the pace in an effort to lose them.

Incredibly, the kids just gritted their teeth and moved through the gears. They were all running barefoot in their dusty shirts and shorts. One little girl, the smallest of the group was showing incredible tenacity and stamina to keep up with Pete. She was dressed in a rather striking pair of pink satin pyjamas, which obviously doubled as her Sunday best. She looked determined to follow the strange white man with the football, to wherever he was going.

The children did not know any English, so it was difficult to communicate the message that we wanted them to return to the church. Eventually Pete came to the end of his two mile stint and we all stood and applauded the children's efforts and rewarded them with sweets to their obvious delight. We especially commended the little girl in the pink pyjamas who had run so passionately for almost two miles. As Pete climbed into the van and took a great swig of Lucozade, we gestured almost pleadingly to the kids for them to return. They didn't seem to be getting the message until Steve emerged from the 4x4 and put on his running shades in preparation for his leg. Steve gruffly ignored

the kids and head down, dribbled the ball forward. With a smile and a wave the children turned back towards Mdisi. It was almost as if they had decided in unison “we’re not going to run for this grumpy sod”.

Steve had reasons not to be cheerful. He was struggling. The ground was extremely hard and the repetitive strain on his knee was taking its toll. He became frustrated with himself that he was finding it tough so early on in the challenge. On this particular leg of the journey, Steve wasn’t just taking “golf shots” from the rough, he was using his pitching wedge on the fairway, driving the ball as far as he could with each kick, partly out of frustration, and partly because of the extra effort needed to control the ball at his feet. This strategy soon turned out to be counter-productive as several times he erratically booted the ball across the road, narrowly missing a passing truck; or he hooked it into the dense thicket of long grass next to the verge and spent several minutes wading in to find it, cursing as he did so.

Out of Mdisi we passed the Bua River valley and for a brief spell the surrounding countryside became lush and green. Henry stopped the van and pointed out a Gyr Falcon on an overhead wire and a Purple Heron wading through some reeds. He told us in his unassuming manner that he was practising his bird spotting and always carried a field guide with him for identification. Henry wanted to become a warden or guide in one of Malawi’s many wildlife parks, and was preparing to take a series of exams on local animals and plants.

A few hundred metres on from the river valley we came to an obstruction in the road. A truck carrying huge bails of tobacco had overturned, spilling its load all across the highway. Fortunately, no-one had been hurt in the accident and there was just enough room for us to squeeze past, with Henry skilfully driving the Toyota off-road. Most of the larger trucks we saw on the M1 were busily transporting tobacco or coffee out of the country. Incidentally, despite tobacco being Malawi’s largest

exported commodity, I don't think I saw one Malawian smoking a cigarette during my time in the country. Perhaps this was purely due to economics, with most local people not being able to afford goods grown specifically for export. Maybe they just have more common sense.

As we continued northwards into arid scrubland, huge dome shaped rocks known locally as kopje rose from the plains to dominate the horizon. In this area; the rural heart of Malawi, the people were noticeably poorer. The villages were collections of randomly built wooden shacks with corrugated iron sheets acting as roofs. Some of these dwellings were half finished brick buildings lying dormant and useless on abandoned allotments, started presumably by some well meaning missionary agency or a local man who had run out of money, bricks, or even life to finish the job. Scrawny chickens and goats roamed these habitations looking for scraps of food to keep them going. The people looked barely more nourished.

For several hundred metres a group of young boys, perhaps in their early teens trailed the van, their hands outstretched in anticipation, but without the smiles on their faces of the children from the Lilongwe suburbs. These were desperate people, well used to begging at the roadside. Passing westerners were a God-sent opportunity for them and they looked at us with wide-eyed expectancy. But sweets were all we had to give to them and they went away disappointed. Running alongside the boys but further away from the roadside, perhaps wary of the older children or fearful of us, were two young girls, about 5 or 6 years of age. They ran barefoot and wore tattered clothes that were no more than filthy rags. Their faces too were grey with the dust of the road and their distended bellies told the unpalatable truth of their malnourished condition. I watched them both through the lens of my camera, perhaps subconsciously trying to distance myself from them, like I distance myself from those familiar images of poverty I see on the television screen.

Five miles along the highway it was time for us to stop. It was 1.15 pm and we had travelled 26.2 miles. Our finishing point markers were a dominant kopje, Mount Mpella, to our right and a small village indented from the roadside to our left. We parked the van and waited for Steve to finish the last hundred metres of the day. As I looked back at him through my binoculars I could see Srimi being bossed by Linda into the bush to act as a lookout while she went to the toilet. I panned across to the village. There were two or three forlorn looking shacks, next to which a woman had stopped her work and was staring right back at me. She continued to stand quite still for several minutes before continuing her work. Next to her was a young child, no older than five, and incredibly, on her small hip she carried a baby. She smiled and waved. Deciding it was rude to stare; I put the binoculars down and waved back.

Across the road, Henry was having a kickabout with the two Johns and sliced the ball clumsily across the road. He was an avid football fan, but evidently not the possessor of any discernable football talent himself. I turned the camera to Pete for a makeshift interview at the end of our second marathon, but my mind went blank. "So Pete, here we are with some breathtaking views of the Malawi countryside...tell us a little bit about the flora and fauna of the region..." Pete wisely ignored my question and talked about something completely different instead. I still wasn't getting the hang of journalism. I tried again when Srimi and Linda wandered into shot, praising their medical contribution to my imaginary viewers, but the doctors were a little too shy to say much on camera.

I decided to stop interviewing and let the spectacular scenery speak for itself. I panned the camera across the majestic horizon one last time, but the shot was spoiled by the site of a middle aged man, clad in tourist khakis, balancing precariously on top of a whitewashed stone. It was John Mac, who had decided to take a break from football and perch himself on top of a faded signpost to Mndinsi Primary School. As if to cement the

bizarreness of the shot, a man cycled into view with a dead goat strapped to his handlebars. It seemed to sum up our day; our crazy challenge; our remote but beautiful location; and the juxtaposition between two very different cultures.

Pete, as ever, was up-beat about the day. Yes we had encountered some disturbing poverty and Steve's knee was giving him problems, but we were bang on schedule and we had met some friendly and supportive people along the way. I turned to talk to Steve but he was not there. Nobody had noticed him crawl quietly into the passenger seat of the Toyota and fasten his seat belt. We turned simultaneously to see him grimacing at us through the window; "Come on boys, what are we waiting for?" It was hard not to laugh.

Before we left, I ambled across the road to take a leak in the tall grass behind the signpost. I felt awkward because I could clearly see the local woman still staring at me from her hut. It struck me how incredibly rude I was to blunder into her village, stare at her through binoculars, point a camera at her children, and then to cap it all, take a piss in her front garden.

CHAPTER 10 **DON BRIONI**

With the day's running complete, it was time to drive the 53 miles back to Lilongwe to spend a relaxing evening at the hotel. It was to be our last night in Lilongwe as we hoped to reach the town of Kasungu on the third day of the trek, staying at the Kasungu Inn for three nights. The town was smaller than Lilongwe and we didn't really know what to expect in the way of accommodation. With that in mind we decided to make the most of our relative luxury at the Korean Garden Lodge.

Back at the Korean we had lunch beside the hotel swimming pool which none of us – for fear of illness or injury – had been brave enough to trial. The lunchtime menu was exactly the same as the Korean Garden Restaurant we had visited two nights before, but this time we decided to steer clear of the Chinese fare and went for burgers and chips instead. Technically perhaps not the most nutritious of foods for the two honed athletes to be taking into their systems, but after 7 hours on the road the stodgy meal certainly hit the spot. Linda was again overly suspicious of the side salad accompanying the meal and urged us to leave it well alone. Steve just rolled his eyes. “Oh just eat it Linda” he said stuffing down another mouthful.

After lunch we all caught naps in our hotel rooms. John McCarthy cocooned himself inside his mosquito net and set his wretched alarm clock one more time. The irritating ditty woke us both at 7 in time to meet up with the group and head on foot to

the old town centre once again. Next to the Land and Lakes offices we had spotted a nice looking bistro named Don Brioni's. It was billed as the most popular eating establishment in Lilongwe so we decided it was worth a visit.

Despite the name on the sign and Italian food on the menu, Don Brioni's had the feel of a 1950's American diner about it. There were hundreds of plaques on the walls with messages from many of the restaurants past patrons. People travelling through Malawi from all over the world had added their little markers on Don Brioni's walls. "The food here is great – Pat and Shona from Canada", "Don, we love you! – Craig and Dianne from Barnstable", "We had a great time here – Suzi and Dave from New Zealand." There were even a few famous names on the walls but whether Elton John and George Michael really had sat down to eat beneath the giant swirling fan above us was very much open to debate. For \$20 we could have added our own moniker, but we decided to resist the temptation.

The Italian food we ordered was excellent and we enjoyed it in a room filled with chattering tourists. We hadn't seen so many white faces gathered together since our arrival; this was obviously one of the more up-market places to dine in Lilongwe, but after a long day on the road we didn't feel too guilty about eating into our kitty so to speak. Equally delighted we were spending our Yankee Dollar was our urbane host Don Brioni himself, who moved among his guests, schmoozing and joking as if he owned the place...which of course he did.

Don looked more like a tourist than a restaurant proprietor in his khaki shorts and Hawaiian shirt, drifting from table to table, drawing plaudits and adulation from his international clientele. In fact he didn't look very Italian either. That's because he wasn't. He was plain Brian Sibley from Oxford who had settled in Malawi in 1990 after a spell working for a computer firm in South Africa where he had acquired a pronounced Afrikaans accent and a bluff native wit. Arriving confidently at our table he

politely enquired where we were from. “Most of us are from Southampton” replied Pete.

“Oh I’m sorry about that!” remarked the Don, making reference to the Saints’ premiership exit. He then went on to ask us about our stay in Malawi. John F summarised our challenge with typical humility, but I think we were all expecting Don to be a little more impressed with our efforts than his dry remark suggested; “You must have a lot of balls to accomplish such a campaign!” he said, and he winked at Linda rather pleased with his pun before moving on to the next table.

Linda scowled and whispered across the table; “What a creepy man!” Steve nodded in agreement.

“Yes, he didn’t come across particularly well did he?” I said with a smile. “Harmless though.”

“Well, you say that” replied Steve, “but the question has to be asked, what’s a man like him doing here in Malawi?”

“Well he’s running quite a successful restaurant for tourists isn’t he?” I said, not quite following Steve’s train of thought.

Linda had cottoned on to her brother’s implication. “I think he’s here for the women.” She said salaciously. I couldn’t quite believe what I was hearing.

“Come on!” I replied, not quite sure why I was sticking up for the Don, “He might have come across as a bit sleazy, but that doesn’t make him a sex tourist!”

“You are very naïve David” said Steve through a world weary grimace.

Steve and Linda’s premise was ridiculous. Don Brioni was a big fish in a very small pond, that’s why he was here. He’d set up his own lucrative business in an African capital city and he enjoyed exchanging banter with people from all over the world. It was as simple as that. Just because he had a dry sense of

humour and came across as a bit of an arrogant old womaniser didn't make him a sex pest!

With the debate still raging over Don Brioni's dubious credentials, we left the restaurant and headed back to the Korean Garden Lodge. Without street lights our journey home was dark and unsettling with several persistent beggars pleading with us pitifully for our small change. There was a considerable chill in the air as we carefully negotiated our way past the roadside cess pits that made the air smell foul. More disconcertingly, a pack of feral dogs had started following us in the dark. We could hear them trotting behind us, drooling expectantly. One of them howled making me jump. They looked emaciated and extremely hungry. I remembered what the nurse at the immunisation clinic had told me as she was injecting £100 worth of rabies vaccine into my left arm.

"Now this won't actually protect you if you get bitten by a rabid dog, but it will buy you a few hours until you get to a hospital for treatment." At the time, the inoculation had seemed an expensive waste of money, but now, with the wolves at my door so to speak, it was looking like a good investment. Walking briskly, herded together in flock formation, we made it back to the hotel alive, but never-the-less the sheep analogy was to continue. I was about to be mercilessly shorn at the hands of two cackling hyenas.

Pete had brought a set of clippers with him to Malawi to keep his short cropped hair in check. Steve, who if he cared to grow it, was also the possessor of an impressive Afro, liked to keep his curls as short as possible too. My hair, on the other hand, (or should that be "on the other head"?) was very much of the straight persuasion, and traditionally I liked to wear it long. Not excessively long, but never-the-less, long enough to comfortably cover my receding temples. Steve and Pete had mocked my limp curtain hairstyle for years saying that I should cut it short like theirs. I had continually resisted, thinking they were just jealous

that I could grow my hair a little longer without looking like Leo Sayer. But these were dangerous times, and I felt like experimenting with my look.

So, with the dogs at our heels, I turned to Pete with the earnest sincerity of a man about to give his last dying wish, and said;

“Peter, tonight’s the night. I want you to shave my hair.”

Pete and Steve gave each other a joyful glance, as if I had just given them the keys to Pandora’s Box, and they chuckled diabolically to one another all the way back to the hotel.

Back at the Lodge, having escaped the dogs and still feeling brave, I approached the brothers’ hotel room with a fast beating heart. I could hear the mechanical whir of the clippers from inside the door. I was suddenly struck with a sickening feeling of fear and trepidation. What had I got myself into? I edged open the door, half expecting Leatherface to come at me wielding a chainsaw.

It wasn’t. It was Pete wielding his pair of clippers, but he had the same look of menace in his eyes. Steve was also there, scissors in hand, barely able to conceal his mirth. Ever since we were little Steve had taken great pleasure, nay, almost pride in humiliating me. Whether it was ambushing me with a water pistol, or encouraging me to go trespassing and then using his superior athleticism to run away, leaving me puffing and flailing behind to be caught by the angry farmer, Steve had a talent for making me look foolish. And now, 20 years later, I was giving him carte-blanche to do whatever he wanted to one of my most prized possessions – my hair. I honestly believe that if one hundred scantily clad vestal virgins had come dancing into the room at that point, throwing petals about the place and singing a chorus of hallelujahs, Steve could not have been happier.

Before the shaving could commence, Steve believed that it would be best to chop away some of my locks with scissors. He

took a pair in each hand and danced around me impishly snipping here and there. If you've seen the cartoon version of "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe", you may recall a scene where Aslan the great lion is tied to the stone table, suffering in silence while a little sprite frolics around him, gleefully cutting off his mane. If you can picture that, you are in the hotel room in Lilongwe.

Every now and then Steve would stop and howl with laughter at the work of his hands. "Why on earth did I agree to this?" I moaned, resigned to the fact that, as Steve had now chopped off all of the hair on top, but none from the sides, so that I looked like Andy from Little Britain, there was no going back.

Eventually Steve's devilish task was complete. I looked in the mirror at the forlorn hair-shod figure – a bad hair day from hell. But the worst was still to come. Like King Charles giving a nod to the executioner, I asked Pete to set the clippers to grade 2 and finish the job.

But there was a problem. The clippers needed to be oiled, and every time Pete ran the blades over my scalp, they ripped at my hair rather than cutting it smoothly. I yelped with pain at every stroke, so much so that even Steve stopped laughing. Despite the pain, I had to finish the job, and Pete continued in vain to shave my hair as evenly as he could get it. This wasn't easy, not only because of the blunt clippers, but also because Steve had made such a hash of his preliminary cutting.

The final result was a bit of a mess to put it mildly. The Flemings, never the types to admit a failure, assured me that the new look suited me, but I wasn't convinced. With my red-raw scalp feeling like it was on fire, I solemnly trudged back down the corridor to my room for an audience with John Mac. Looking like I had just emerged from a Japanese prisoner of war camp, I inched open the door, and, having survived a literal encounter with a pack of hounds, metaphorically threw myself to the dogs.

CHAPTER 11 MAZUNGU!

It was early morning on Monday the 23rd of May and I peered bleary-eyed at the Romanian orphan in the mirror before taking a shower. John McCarthy was already up and had been cracking gags about my hair since before I was awake. I successfully managed to block him out by turning on the thunderous jet of water that scalded my already sore head. It felt like I was in a torrential downpour of acid rain. It had been a long night and for the first time on the trip I found it difficult to get up. Even John's awful alarm clock had needed several attempts to persuade me out of bed. I comforted myself with the thought that we had an hour-long drive to our starting point and I could catch up on my sleep in the van.

Before leaving Lilongwe, Henry drove us to a petrol station where we filled the Toyota with diesel and bought a copy of the Daily Times. On the back page was the title "Kick for Malawi Run to Mzuzu Begins" above a photo of Steve and Pete Kicking off from Civo Stadium. It seemed our adventure was capturing the collective imagination of Malawi's newspaper readership.

It was Monday and the streets of Lilongwe were teeming with children in various states of dress travelling to school. Some were kitted out with immaculate bright blue blazers. They were the fortunate few who attended the best Catholic fee paying school in the capital. Henry was proud to admit that he was able to send his children there. The majority however were a rag-tag army of

scruffy urchins who slung their satchels over their backs as they trudged reluctantly to school. It was a scene that could have been replicated in any city across Britain, but for the fact that these children were unable to afford shoes.

We said goodbye to Lilongwe for the last time and headed for the little village in the shadow of the large kopje beyond Mdisi. It took us over an hour to reach our starting point and when we got there everyone was bursting for the loo. There was no time for etiquette so I'm afraid to say the unfortunate village got urinated on once again. It was nearly twenty past 8 when Steve kicked off under a surprisingly intense sun. We noticed that the early mornings were usually the hottest times of the day, and now the temperature was already soaring to 28 degrees Celsius.

Towards the end of Steve's first leg, we arrived at a school where hoards of children wearing green and purple uniforms ran from the playground to greet us with shouts of "*Mazungu! Mazungu!*" (white man, white man!). They crowded the van and gurned manically for our cameras, all the time shouting colloquial greetings like "*Bol!*" (Hey) and "*Shup!*" (what's up?!). It was a spontaneous and exuberant welcome, so much so that we were quite taken aback. We certainly didn't have enough sweets with us to share out to all the children, and we felt a little guilty about disrupting their education, so we passed through relatively quickly.

Some of the children abandoned school temporarily in favour of joining Steve on his run. But once they realised he was not particularly willing to play ball, they gradually sloped back to school. This was evidently a more prosperous region than the one we had passed through the previous day. The more fertile soil had produced an abundance of sugar cane, mealy maize and groundnuts that were being collected and dried in small deposits along the roadside. One woman collecting groundnuts offered us a handful each for our journey. They were delicious.

“Malawi nuts” said Henry through a grin “They are the best in the world!” As an unseasoned nut connoisseur, I was prepared to ignore Henry’s bias and go along with the assertion. Henry passed on our thanks to the woman and told her a little about our trip. They laughed and joked for a while in their native tongue of Chichewa so that we all wondered what they were chatting about. I imagined the conversation going something like this;

Henry: The Mazungus thank you for your nuts woman. Personally I think they are nuts to be kicking a football all the way to Mzuzu!

Woman: Kicking a football to Mzuzu? That’s more than nuts, that’s crackers! Tell them they will need a lot of balls!

Henry: Have you met Don Brioni?

Woman: Yes, he tried it on last weekend. I slapped him.

Henry: Are you doing much later tonight...fancy going for a green beer?

He was something of a Ladies Man was our Henry.

It wasn’t long before we were passing a second school, with an equal amount of chaos ensuing. The children swarmed out of their classrooms to wave and shake our hands. It was fairly obvious that this was not the usual welcome they reserved for European visitors. They had been informed of our challenge, probably via their teachers who had heard about us on radio or had read the morning papers. With more than 500 excited children now surrounding the vehicle we could do little but stay inside and wait for the adulation to subside. Feeling like royalty we smiled and waved tentatively, when in hindsight we should

have abandoned our British reserve and reciprocated the enthusiastic greeting.

But again we knew we couldn't stay too long. Pete was already scampering off into the distance, no doubt with children scattering rose petals in front of him as he ran. Surprisingly it was Steve who softened, unable to ignore the ensuing excitement. He grinned at me from the passenger seat; "What d'ya reckon? Shall we give them a ball?"

"Why not?" I replied and clambered across to the back of the van to excavate a flat-packed ball and start pumping. In the mean time Steve was out of the Toyota and awkwardly hi-fiving the children who pogoed in front of him like miniature Massai warriors vying for attention.

Soon an unassuming Headmaster, looking a little incongruous in his neat blue suit, ambled over to discover what event had caused his entire class to suddenly forego his dry geography lesson. He must have been sweating like boil in the bag rice in that suit, but he coolly assessed the situation with a grin. It would be hard to imagine the Head of a large technical college in Southampton being so unconcerned about the disruption to his pupils education. But this was a shrewd Head Teacher and he knew how to milk a situation. Graciously accepting our gift of the football with one hand, he shook Steve's with the other and leant towards him to be heard above the commotion.

"Thank you. This is very kind. But you understand we have girls at this school also. I have a gift for my boys. Now what will you provide for my girls?"

For a few seconds Steve recoiled in something approaching disgust at the Head Teacher's ungrateful request, once again having no choice but to react according to his own society's rules of etiquette. But he quickly remembered that these schools exist with only the meagre resources they can scramble together. There is no stigma attached to asking for these people who naturally want the best for their children.

Thinking on his feet Steve sheepishly produced a couple of packs of biros for the girls and handed them to the slightly disappointed looking Headmaster, who had obviously been holding out for a netball. Steve avoided eye-contact and, managing to shake off a few more kids clinging to his leg, jumped into the van and instructed Henry to advance. Glancing over my shoulder as we sped away I could see a beaming smile in a suit holding up his gifts in triumph above a bobbing sea of young warriors.

It was now swelteringly hot as we passed through the rural district of Mchinkoma and Steve's knee was looking sore and swollen as he rubbed yet more Ibuprophen gel into the affected area. Linda was scowling.

"You need to take it easy Stephen or you're going to do some permanent damage."

Steve didn't need to reply. He just winced and drew the bottom of his t-shirt across his forehead. "It's getting hot out there."

It seemed to take an age to catch up with Pete, and when we finally spotted a garish red t-shirt in the distance, he was predictably surrounded by a trailing entourage of ecstatic children. The welcome and enthusiasm of the youngsters we were passing was incredible, but as we drove further into the rural heartland of Malawi, the districts became noticeably less affluent, and we began to pass children who were altogether less enthusiastic to see us.

A picture of two girls in particular is now seared in my memory. The children were perhaps 10 or 12 years of age and their tatty, mud flecked dresses betrayed their poverty. They were not able to go to school. Perhaps they were among the thousands of AIDS orphans in Malawi having to scrape a living for themselves and their still younger siblings left in their care. They

were standing away from the roadside but had caught our attention because of the truly incredible weights they were carrying. The older of the two was balancing a huge metal container on her head and it was filled to the brim with water. The smaller girl was labouring under the weight of a stack of firewood. I stared in amazement that this small, fragile girl could be strong enough to manage a burden that I would almost certainly have struggled to lift off the ground. As we pointed at the girls in wonder they became alarmed. The girl carrying the water tried to walk faster away from the van and began to spill some of her precious cargo. Her sister began to cry.

“No, no, it’s ok!” we tried to reassure them from within the luxury of our vehicle. This only served to panic them further. Henry leaned out of the window and spoke kindly in Chichewa;

“Don’t be afraid, it’s ok, we will not harm you. Would you like something nice to eat?”

But the girls could not be persuaded to allay their fears. It was so unusual given the rapturous and unconcerned greetings we’d received from other children we had passed. Perhaps they were just anxious at being confronted by white strangers, but I couldn’t help thinking that these girls, in their distress were betraying a horrendous truth about their lives. If indeed they were orphans, they may have feared being taken away into care or custody, or worse.

Half an hour later and we came to the next roadside settlement; the village of Chilonga, where another large group of children joined us on their way home from school. Unlike the two small girls who had to work all day, these youngsters were the lucky ones. They were among the 48% of Malawian children benefiting from the government’s recent drive towards free Primary Education. If they had passed their PSLCE (Primary School Leaving Certificate Exam) and were fortunate enough to have access to funds or sponsorship they might even be at secondary school, studying for their Malawi School Certificates (4 in total).

The group began running alongside the van and John McCarthy amused them by helping them practice their English. "Hello, Hello!" he chanted and the youths merrily echoed "Hello, Hello" in response, giggling hysterically at the strange sounds they had uttered. Unfortunately, John couldn't think of very much more to say that could progress the kids' learning other than "We love football!", but it seemed appropriate enough given the nature of our task.

While John M was struggling to find phrases for the local school children to repeat, John F was having his own communication difficulties. A man with an accent thicker than treacle had approached the van and engaged him in stilted conversation.

"Gif me yo meny!" said the man matter-of-factly.

"Yes, we're kicking a football from Lilongwe to Mzuzu!" replied the Professor excitedly.

"Gif me yo meny!" pursued the man.

"Give me your what?!"

"Gif me yo meny!"

"No, didn't get any of that. Have a nice day though!"

You had to hand it to John, he had diplomacy down pat.

Taking a rest in the front seat of the Toyota, Pete turned the camera on to Henry. "How are you finding the trip so far Henry? Are you enjoying it?"

"Oh yes, I am very enjoying it!" beamed Henry, who recoiled shyly as he saw he was being filmed.

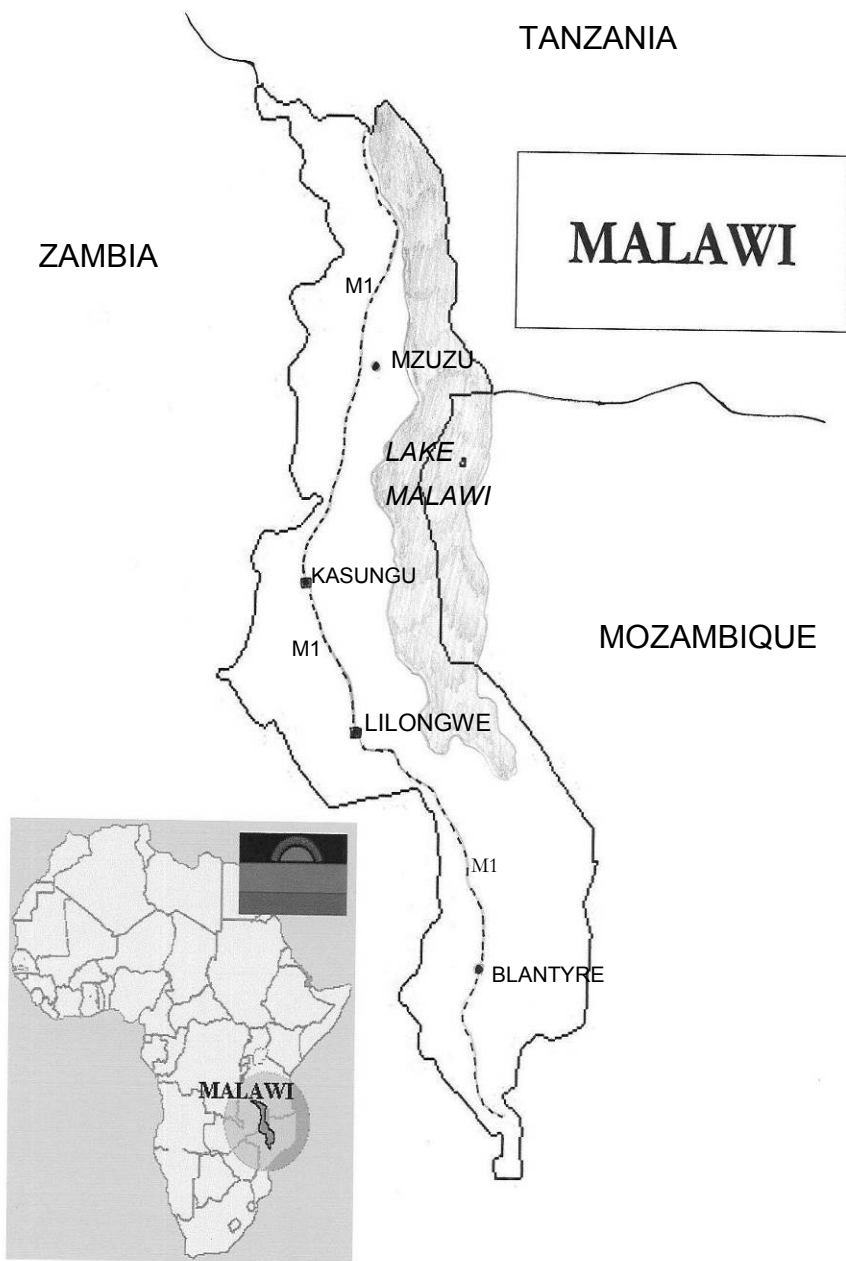
"Have you done anything like this before?" asked Pete.

"Oh no, it is a unique challenge! The first of its kind! The runners are doing a very good job! Thank you!" He laughed and turned away from the intimidating lens with typical humility.

As we approached the town of Kasungu, the soil became increasingly fertile and more piles of sweet potatoes, sugar cane and mealy maize were deposited along the roadside for sale or collection. To our right a marshy lake gleamed green as it reflected the sun, which had not cooled since the heat of the morning. To our left a large forested Kopje rose, overlooking the small but significant town of Kasungu. Henry explained that on top of the hill was a shack where Malawi's former President, the notorious Hastings Banda was born and raised. Later he had returned to his birthplace and rebuilt the shack, turning it into a lavish mountainside retreat. But more of him later, for now the challenge was looking surmountable and the Flemings progress unstoppable. The boys were only 3 days into their marathon dribble and we were already at Kasungu. We hadn't planned on arriving at the town until late on Day 4. It was remarkable progress considering Steve's dodgy knee.

As if to throw a token spanner in the works, a small curmudgeonly thorn decided to spear itself into the soft and inviting environs of a rubber bladder, and in doing so, put an end to our first football. Considering the amount of abuse Steve had leathered into it during his particularly grumpy moments, not to mention the 12,000 kicks along 68 miles of hard earth and tarred roads, we were surprised that it had lasted quite so long. Pete stopped at a roadside sign that read "Welcome to Kasungu" and held the dusty and deflated ball aloft for a seminal photograph. "God bless ball number one. You have served us well." He muttered gravely, before laying the forlorn trailblazer to rest in the back of the van.

Further along the road, dazzling in the glorious sunshine was a sign directing travellers to the Kasungu Inn, our next port of call. The sign proudly announced that the hotel was "forging ahead in hospitality", but rather than making a bee line for the Inn, the boys decided to forge ahead themselves, determining to





The Kick 4 Malawi team; from left John McCarthy, John Fleming, Steve Fleming, Linda Bandi, Srini Bandi, Pete Fleming, the author



Running with Pete and some street kids on the outskirts of Lilongwe



Steve handing out sweets to the children of a village near Kasungu



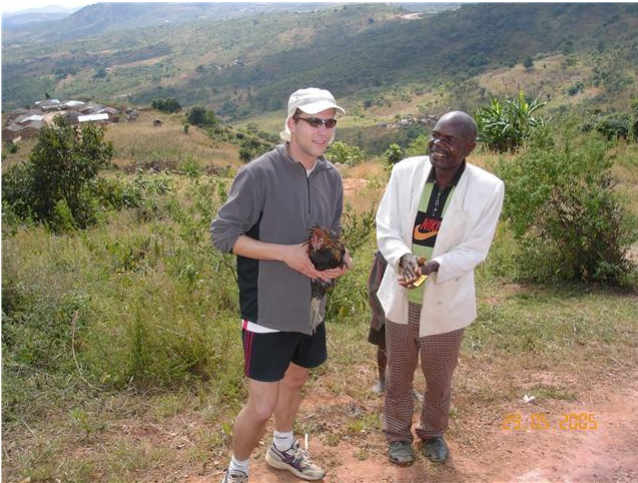
Mazungu! Kids streaming from a school near Kasungu



A Head Master, happy with a donated football “but what about my girls?”



One of the many needy children we encountered



Pete is surprised to be presented with a live chicken.



Steve and Pete approaching the finishing line at Mzuzu



The procession to St.Johns gathers momentum



Children and staff at St Johns Orphanage gather to welcome the Flemings



Sunrise at Mkuzi Beach



The Kick 4 Malawi team at Liwonde National Park



Kick 4 Life brings two boys from Lesotho on a visit to England to meet the England team including Fabio Capello and David Beckham.



complete another full marathon before their spirits dimmed and their legs cramped. The boys ran on past Kasungu, which all our guide books agreed was a town of little interest for tourists, of note only for the impressive Kasungu Inn, built by and for the use of government officials travelling through from the northern provinces to the centres of power and commerce in Lilongwe and Blantyre.

Kasungu is also a crossroads where the M1 passes the main route from Zambia in the West to the Lakeside town of Nkhotakota in the East, and a reminder of the terrible trade that devastated East Africa during the early to mid 1800s. For this lateral route from the interior to the Tanzanian coast was an important slave route.

The slave trade had been a part of East African life long before the Europeans had arrived, but ironically just when the Atlantic slave trade was being abolished and dismantled by the British in the West of the continent, to the East the trade took on a revitalised importance and became even more brutal in its nature. As the market for ivory and gold became less lucrative, so the value of slaves increased. The area from Lake Malawi to the East African coast came to be dominated by Omani Arabs who brought with them an organised and ruthless will to satisfy their Sultans' need for eunuch slaves. By 1849, 40,000 slaves were being sold annually at Zanzibar's slave auctions. Thousands more Africans died during slave raids, or en-route to the coast on their long march from the rift valley. It was a sobering thought that the ancestors of the people we were encountering around Kasungu would have lived in fear of this terrifying trade just 150 years ago.

The Omani slavers were methodical and brutal in their approach to their grisly work. The night raids they initiated, known as *chijwumba*, were swift and efficient. First they would let off a volley of gunfire around their village target. The slavers would lie in wait outside hut entrances to club or spear to death

the men of the village, who would rush from their huts to see what was happening. The fittest women and children were selected as captives and tied together with iron neck-bracelets; the rest were killed on the spot. Those unfortunate enough to have survived the raids were herded into slave stockades before being frog-marched to the lake to be shipped to the Eastern shore. Their agony was compounded by a 4 month march to Kilwa, carrying heavy loads of ivory and other goods for the entirety of the journey. If any of the slaves resisted or became tired or ill, they were instantly beheaded so that their neck-bracelets could be re-used. At Kilwa, the male captives were castrated because eunuchs fetched the higher prices. Eventually the remaining slaves would be shipped to Zanzibar in such terrible conditions that often a cargo of 300 slaves would be reduced to just 20 or 30 survivors by the time it arrived at port.

The horrors this landscape had witnessed in the past were now being revisited in the form of poverty and disease. It was good to be reminded of this as it put into focus the purpose of our trip. We had come to make some sort of impact on a few lives less privileged than our own. But it also brought starkly into view the innate resilience of the people in this part of the world. They have a joy that is infectious, a love of life that sidesteps their sorrow and belittles their hardship. And these are a forgiving people. The Yao tribe had lived along the lakeshore and participated fully in the slave trade, aiding and abetting their Arabian mentors by infiltrating and decimating the local Tonga and Chewa tribes. It is worth noting that the Yao still live by the lakeside, yet in remarkable peace with the other tribes in the region, despite their Islamic faith marking their difference and reinforcing the link to a shameful past allegiance. Through talking to Henry and others, it seemed to me that Malawi was a surprisingly tolerant and integrated nation. The Yao were just one of many minority tribes now accepted by the whole; their unsavoury past now seemingly forgiven.

Two miles beyond Kasungu we came to a roadblock across the northern entrance to the town. Henry told us that the army officers manning the station were on the look-out for smuggled goods, particularly marijuana from the North. The guards at the barrier seemed bored out of their minds and the sight of a lithe European, confidently dribbling a ball towards them must have been a welcome break from the norm. If this was the case then they didn't show it, as two of them, Arthur and Rashid, lackadaisically ambled over to chat with Henry.

"So what are you doing?" enquired Arthur with a "seen it all before" look on his face. Henry told the soldiers about the challenge in as brief and good humoured a way as possible.

"That is all very well" countered Rashid, "but what are you going to give us to get through this barrier?"

This might have seemed like a rather threatening attempt at blackmail to the uninitiated, and to this Africa novice it certainly came across as intimidation, but Henry assured us that it was all good humoured and "par for the course." The Malawian army were low paid, under-motivated and generally on the make, and Arthur and Rashid were merely making the most of an opportunity; milking the Mazungu cash cow as it were.

In the end the two soldiers were perfectly satisfied with a couple of bottles of water from the boot of the Toyota to see them through the heat of the day. They let us through with a smile and a wave, wishing us well for the duration of our trip. It proved to be a premature goodbye as we were to see them again and again as we shuttled to and from the Kasungu Inn over the course of the next few days. It amused us every time we saw Arthur and Rashid looking at us with puzzled expressions, wondering exactly what we were up to. They must have been scratching their heads in disbelief every time we drove past, commenting to one another;

"I thought those boys were kicking a ball to Mzuzu. It seems to me they are just driving back and forth!"

“Well at least we will not be thirsty for a while!”

Keeping up the illusion of the challenge was something that we had discussed frequently. When you tell someone that you’re going to kick a ball from A to B, covering 250 miles in 10 days, the impression you generally leave is that you will be completing the feat without stopping and without doubling back on yourself. Accepting that particular challenge may have resulted in a place in the Guinness Book of Records, none of us were willing to risk death in the process. Our primary concern was always to fundraise for a good cause, and have an adventure in with the bargain. Be that as it may, we realised that our challenge was being written about and we didn’t want to underplay the uniqueness or difficulty of the boys achievements by being seen scurrying to the relative luxury of a hotel every night. As a result, Pete and Steve ducked out of sight every time we passed Arthur and Rashid at the roadblock.

It seemed however, that we needn’t have bothered trying to engineer our own media coverage, as many people we met along the trip seemed to have very skewed ideas about who we were and what we were trying to achieve. As you may recall, we were not the only footballers from England currently touring Malawi under the spotlight of the media, and this seemed to cause some genuine confusion as our stories got mixed by a combination of bad reporting and local hearsay.

Early in the afternoon I decided to run my second stretch of the day with Pete and we came across some excited youths on creaky bikes pedalling towards us. They dismounted and shook our hands vigorously, announcing;

“There are rumours in our village that you are Rio Ferdinand and Gary Neville!” Pete and I looked at each other and began to laugh.

“Well you’re a bit too short and white to be Rio!” I quipped.

“You’re ugly enough to be Gary Neville!” he countered.

We had to let our excited fans down with the news that we were not exactly the pair of famous Manchester United footballers their village had been expecting, with the rather botched explanation that we were in fact footballers from Southampton instead. The group cycled away only mildly disappointed, still convinced that they had at least met some English Premiership players.

This was not the last time we were mistaken for our more famous footballing counterparts along the route and, I am ashamed to say, not the last time we milked the admiration and acclaim meant for others. But looking back, I don't feel particularly guilty, especially when I recall that those seemingly star-struck football loving teenagers later came pedalling back towards us and demanded, without the slightest hint of deference;

“Give us your ball!”

We glanced at each other for a second and then directed them to David James in the van.

CHAPTER 12 THE EXTRAVAGANT TIP

“Thank goodness John smuggled those scissors past customs.” I thought to myself as I peered carefully into my hotel room mirror and snipped away at my scraggy sides. John Mac was singing loudly in the shower, while the other team members were snoozing the afternoon away. Somewhere in the distance the unmistakable sound of an African church choir, probably practicing for a Sunday meeting came wafting melodically across the stale, heavy air, making a mockery of John’s jovial rendition of Bohemian Rhapsody.

The Kasungu Inn was an impressive hotel by Malawian standards and we instantly made ourselves at home. The rooms were spacious and comfortable and in the hotel lobby there were several members of staff on hand, ready and willing to fetch a green beer and put the cost on a running tab. As we walked across to the main hotel complex from our chalet, John Mac, showered, refreshed and always on the look out for a DIY conundrum, spotted a fault in the otherwise immaculate building; “Nice place” he concluded, “but look at that roof – couple of tiles coming off over there.”

Later in the afternoon Pete and Steve, never ones to succumb to apathy, even after a marathon, wandered off to explore Kasungu and buy some newspapers. They returned an hour later with the Malawi Nation and the Daily Times, and a story of how they were unable to find a shop in the vicinity so had purchased

the newspapers from a man in the street. We ravenously devoured the papers for news of our progress but neither contained any article about our challenge. Instead the news was dominated by the biggest story in Malawi; the AIDS crisis.

The first reported case of HIV in Malawi was in 1985, but evidence suggests that the disease had already reached epidemic proportions across southern Africa by the mid 1980s. The government's initial response was to implement a short term AIDS strategy consisting of limited testing and education, but this was severely hampered by the autocratic nature of the Banda regime in power at the time. Over the coming decade 650,000 people would lose their lives as a result. With the establishment of democratic government in 1994 came a new openness about the crisis and new initiatives to tackle it. In 2000 a 5 year national strategic framework to combat AIDS was implemented and the following year the National AIDS Commission (NAC) was established to oversee a number of care and prevention initiatives; but by this point AIDS had irrevocably damaged Malawi's social and economic infrastructure.

In 2002 Malawi suffered one of the worst famines in its history, with HIV sited as one of the main causes of the food shortage. Farmers could not provide food and workers were unable to maintain their families, either because they were dying of the disease themselves, or because they had to care for family members who were. The crisis deepened with hospitals suggesting an estimated 70% of all deaths were AIDS related.

With a newly elected government in 2004 came a renewed impetus to apply Malawi's first national AIDS policy and a Principal Secretary for HIV and AIDS was appointed to oversee a unified treatment, education and prevention strategy. With significant financial help from a number of international aid agencies including the World Bank and World Health Organisation, these policies had managed to stabilise the HIV

prevalence rate to between 11% and 17%, but this meant that over 1million of its 14 million population were still in desperate need of expensive anti-retroviral treatment. A high proportion of those infected were unaware of their status and there was still a great deal of work that needed to be done to combat negative stigma and misinformation about the disease, particularly in the rural areas.

And reading the newspaper, it was obvious that there was still much debate about how to best tackle the issue of HIV and AIDS in Malawi, particularly with regard to its prevention. Some articles called for widespread contraception advice and the distribution of condoms throughout the country, while the majority of opinion seemed to be behind the strong abstinence campaign being promoted by Malawi's large church going community. These two groups with their differing points of view, though working towards a common goal, seemed locked in vehement disagreement and incapable of working together.

The abstinence campaigners believed that the distribution of contraception was tantamount to promoting extra-marital liaisons, thereby increasing the risk of infection, while the liberalists were convinced that the abstinence campaigners were engaged in an unrealistic moral crusade, guilty of slowing the progress of disseminating knowledge of a more practical prevention method. Put simply, it was a battle between No Sex and Safe Sex. To me, it seemed completely counterproductive for the proponents of these equally valid opinions to be spending so much time and effort in deconstructing one another's argument, when the real battle lay elsewhere.

As the afternoon wore on I flicked on through the paper towards less weighty matters. The music and entertainment section had an article on Malawi's premier musician; the ubiquitous "Chimpanzee". Chimpanzee (not his real name) was a singer song-writer of considerable gravitas. Apparently a mix of soulful balladeer and Gospel inspired journeyman whose

influences spanned the cultural divide between tribal rhythms and rhythm and blues. He had a new album out and was busily promoting the first single from it, currently being played on Malawi radio. Chimpanzee appeared to be my main competition in the battle for chart success.

That evening over dinner we asked the waiter whether we could listen to the radio as we ate. He duly obliged but we neither heard the Kick 4 Malawi song or Chimpanzee's latest single. I wondered whether Myessa, our contact at the radio station had been true to his word and was playing our song. I thought it unlikely and that I should probably put that ego-massaging dream to bed where it belonged.

Early next morning after a satisfying sleep we were back in the hotel dining room feasting on another wonderfully expansive breakfast. Grapefruit, cereal, toast, bacon and eggs any way we liked it. We'd had an early night and felt refreshed and raring to go. All except Steve that is, who claimed to have spent all night dreaming of a dusty ball at his feet. The thought of another day of constant dribbling made him feel physically sick, but he still managed to force down an inordinate amount of food to sustain him for another half-marathon. It was Day 4 of the challenge and we were ahead of schedule. We had booked two more nights at the Kasungu Inn and were already well past the town. It was obvious that we would be driving an awfully long way to our starting point in two days time.

Today however, It didn't take Henry long to drive us to the solitary acacia tree that had doubled as our finishing post the previous day. We were there by 8 and Pete kicked off the day's running, followed eagerly by his father. It was at this point that we realised a slight hitch in our plans. We had left the Lucozade back at the hotel. It was decided that we should leave Pete and John on the road while we sped back to the hotel to retrieve the vital energy drinks that the boys required. Back at the hotel Linda

complained that she felt unwell and so stayed behind at the hotel to spend the day recovering. Dashing back past a bewildered Arthur and Rashid at the checkpoint, we caught up with Pete and his father just as they came up to the 2 mile change over point.

North of Kasungu we entered the Bawe district, where yellowing meadows and grassland gently incline toward the foothills of the Viphya Mountains of Northern Malawi. We looked ahead and wondered how close to the forested peaks we were likely to get by the end of the day. To the east of the M1, which was smooth and well surfaced along this part of the route, Kasungu National Park, Malawi's largest big game reserve straddled the Zambian border. As I joined Steve on his first run of the day I strained my eyes across the vast plains to the left of the road, intent on catching a glimpse of a Burchill's Zebra or herd of Roan Antelope. In terms of my premonition of being mauled by wild animals, this was about as close as we were likely to come to dangerous creatures on the journey, but realistically the small populations of lion, leopard and cheetah resident in the area were rarely sighted away from the boundaries of the National Park, and never close to human habitation. Despite the lack of sightings, it was thrilling enough to know that those legendary animals of the African savannah were out there somewhere, hidden in the dappled undergrowth of the near beyond.

We soon came to a progression of shabby villages clustered along the roadside. As on previous days these were mixtures of small whitewashed brick or concrete buildings and wooden huts indented from the roadside, their male residents often killing time in small groups huddled around a smoking barbecue, chewing sugar cane and swigging intoxicating home-brewed liquor while their wives and children toiled in the fields. The number of half-built structures that littered the landscape around these villages was staggering. Left to fracture and decay in the heat, the forlorn looking ghosts remained as monuments to failed ambitions; past ventures that lacked the funding or planning to

see completion. They stood as potent reminders of the African condition; ideas without finance; goodwill without foresight; and hope crippled by corruption.

But these shell dwellings also indicated life. Life in all its abundance; joyful life that sings triumphant over death; life that dances out beyond the ever-present shadows of toil and struggle, heart-ache and disease, sickness and starvation. This life was apparent wherever we looked. It was in the irrepressible smiles of the children who streamed from their classrooms to greet us. It was in the welcoming gestures of the women who gave us portions of their valuable food. It was in the men riding their boneshakers to work or mending them doggedly by the roadside. Yes, it was in those half-built structures too, and on second glance I began to see them not as evidence of idleness or decay, but as cups half-full; gestures of ongoing belief; bold statements of intent; strange beacons of hope.

As we passed through one complex of houses, Henry mentioned that the whole area was coordinated by a local mission. I wondered for a second why Henry's words were jarring in my mind.

The word "mission" has negative connotations fostered by our increasingly cynical view of British colonial history. For years social historians have weaved a narrative that links the missionary zeal of the Victorians with that of destructive expansionism in Africa. A mission to "civilise" a continent; driven in turn by a cocktail of economic imperatives, imperial arrogance, and ultimately racist intents. We are encouraged to imagine naïve and somewhat repressed do-gooders, bible-bashing their way clumsily into the African interior to establish mission houses; equally naïve heathens coerced to salvation by misplaced deference for their patrician benefactors, and a healthy fear of the guns they brought with them. We are told that these missions paved the way for trade routes and imperialist leaches to tap the local

resources and bleed its people dry. But while there are elements of truth in this interpretation, it's one that overshadows the huge amount of good that the missionary movement has brought to this part of Africa over the past two centuries.

In fact, the majority of the missions established in Africa by the Victorians, while often naïve and prone to mistakes, were pioneered by incredibly brave and robust men and women, driven by genuine altruism, who demonstrated a well meaning desire to spread the Gospel message of love and peace. One such hero was Dr David Livingstone.

Livingstone was no government patsy, bumbling into Africa with an economic or political agenda. He was very much a lone adventurer, intent on living out his Christian faith by bringing practical help and a message of hope to the African tribes he encountered. His aim was not to turn the native people into white clone converts. When Livingstone entered a community, he endeavoured to learn its language and culture. He spent time, often years helping to solve inter-tribal disputes and local problems, always at great personal risk.

And, it should be said, the Africa he encountered was not the idyllic pre-westernised utopia, untainted by the greed and corruption of colonisation as many suppose. It was a landscape devastated by the horrors of the Omani slave trade and the cataclysmic blood bath brought on by the *Mfecane*.

Mfecane means “The Crushing” and it is a name given to the period of history in Southern Africa from 1800-1830 when a horrendous series of events led to the slaughter of an estimated 2 million people from the Cape Peninsula to the Great Rift Valley. The rise of the Zulu nation, immortalised in films starring Michael Caine and in the stylized wares found in countless African gift-shops, is highly mythologized. Often portrayed sympathetically as noble warriors, striking out bravely but hopelessly against Westernizing forces, the Zulus hold an almost affectionate place in our skewed versions of Hollywood history.

But what is often missed is the incredible brutality and destruction the Zulus, led by their infamous chief Shaka, left in their wake.

Shaka built the Zulu clan into a force to be reckoned with by invading and co-opting the Nguni speaking kingdoms of South Central Africa. His methods in battle were brutal and ruthless, instructing his troops to surround villages in U-shaped formations and press inward until they had stabbed entire populations to death. The result was an extended massacre, the like of which was not seen again on the continent until the Rwandan holocaust of the early 1990's. Those who were not killed by Shaka's marauding army either joined its ranks or fled, taking with them the Zulu's terrifying brand of militarism.

One such group of plundering refugees were the Jere-Ngoni. Led by the blood-thirsty Zwangendaba, this travelling army surged northwards through Mozambique and on towards the Great Lakes, laying everything to waste. Every village they passed they plundered, sparing only the young men (who were drafted into their divisions) and women of marriageable age. Old men and children were bludgeoned to death; women had their breasts cut off and were left to bleed. For many years the Jere-Ngoni settled in the area west of Lake Malawi where they continued to terrorise the local Tonga and Tumbuka tribes for many decades. This period is still remembered by many in Northern Malawi as "The Time of Killing".

And it was into this war-ravaged landscape with its beleaguered people that David Livingstone ventured when he first sailed up the Shire River into Lake Malawi during the latter part of 1859, with a view to establishing a lake-side mission. His diary records a lakeshore "strewn with human skeletons and putrid bodies". Livingstone had, for many years, been trying to persuade the British government to finance an expedition into this part of Africa to find a navigable river which could open up the interior to European influence. But Livingstone's belief in the

“Three C’s” of Christianity, Commerce and Colonialism was primarily as a remedy for the atrocities of the ongoing slave trade and the lawlessness wrought by the Mfecane, never for reasons of control or politics.

Livingstone’s vision of ushering in peace and prosperity to the region was hard fought but largely achieved. His own expeditions into what is now Malawi were initially unsuccessful; a series of disasters leading to Malaria and death for several of his travelling companions, including his own wife Mary in 1861. But ultimately, Livingstone’s efforts paved the way for a succession of missions along the lakeshore and the British influence they established put an end to the despicable slave trade in 1874, the year in which this forgotten hero died.

So it irritates me when people speak of the evils of colonialism in Africa without acknowledging the enormous sacrifices and good intentions of people like Livingstone. Yes, there are many aspects of our imperialist past that we should be ashamed of, and certainly Western governments have an ongoing responsibility to promote fair-trade and investment in areas they formerly occupied, but a one-sided assessment of our involvement in Africa does not do justice to the valuable work of church missions of the past and present.

Now, as Henry pointed out yet another mission maintained school and hospital, it was good to challenge preconceptions, even my own, and see an example of the church bringing real tangible hope to a community, combining faith in God with a faith in humanity.

After leaving the mission complex we entered a long stretch of rural scrubland. There was a roadside path which the runners tried to stick to, but at one point Steve found it so uneven that he began kicking along the smooth tarmac of the road. Shortly afterwards a silver Beamer slowed to Steve’s trotting pace and a stern looking official motioned for him to stop running. The

electric windows of the BMW whirled down slowly and the man poked an angry head in Steve's direction;

"Why are you playing football on the road?! I will fine you!" he barked.

Steve looked flustered as he tried to muster a reasonable reply. Luckily Henry had realised immediately what was happening and had leapt from the Toyota to lend a hand with the explanation. Whatever Henry said, it seemed to have the desired affect of placating the government official who was himself on his way to Mzuzu, and he even wished Steve good luck before he sped off along the highway. It was a close escape as the authorities in Malawi are quite capable of expanding their own personal powers as they see fit, and without Henry's diplomacy, the episode could well have taken our challenge, quite literally, off the beaten track.

After the incident with the official, Steve seemed to pick up strength. The pain in his knee had diminished and his general stamina was beginning to increase. In his own words, he was "on fire" and his recurring hallucinations of endless dribbling were behind him. Day 4 was also a good day for me and I felt fresh on each of my, by now obligatory three runs. Pete however, was not feeling quite so good. As we approached Chulu Market – a dusty enclave surrounded by trees and brick huts, he stopped and began to feel the top of his foot gingerly. His trainers had been rubbing for the last two days and he had quite a nasty blister forming. He limped gamely towards my inquisitive camera and dismissed his discomfort with; "I'm sure I'll run it off!"

The day was now turning grey and blustery, and without the heat from the sun, even a little chilly. Pete was hounded once again by a group of excitable children, mostly girls, some of whom were dressed in the navy blue uniform of the mission school we had passed earlier. Rather than charging onwards and aggravating his sore foot further, Pete took some time out to pass the ball around in a circle with the giggling children, who

once again showed some impressive barefoot control. It was magic for the camera and we all stopped to watch and cheer the girls on before we shook their hands and offered them each a sweet.

It had been a quieter day, and because we were ahead of schedule, we could afford to be more relaxed about our progress. A little further on we were joined by more children who ran with us for several kilometres before we came across a small, dusty football pitch away from the roadside where we enjoyed a brief kick-a-bout before heading on through some tall yellow grass that lined the road. The children continued to follow until we stopped to acknowledge a significant landmark on our journey. We had reached the 100 mile point, and we marked the occasion with group photos and a bonanza of sweets for the children who happened to be with us at that point. John Fleming got down on one knee to show the children pictures of themselves on his digital camera, and their screams of joy and incredulity were marvellous to behold. I wondered how many of them had seen a photograph of themselves before; judging by their ecstatic reactions, probably not many.

As the sun began to fall towards the now looming hills in front of us, we jogged the two or so miles towards the stopping point for the end of the day. The children, determined to stay with their new found friends continued with us. I decided to reward their efforts by handing out pens and paper, which they grabbed eagerly out of my hands. A woman carrying a child on her back and another in her left arm wandered across to see what was happening and held out her free hand to plead for a gift of her own. All I had left was a piece of lined A4 paper and I put it in her hand. The woman spoke to me vehemently in her own language, a pained expression creasing her features. I looked over my shoulder to Henry, but he merely shrugged. There was no need for an interpretation. Steve rummaged in the back of the

van and brought over an empty plastic water bottle. She accepted it with a gracious bow and seemed satisfied. Empty water bottles, just rubbish to us, were a commodity of real value to those in rural Malawi who often had to walk miles to their nearest water source.

It was a poignant end to another successful day on the road, and we began the 30 mile journey back to Kasungu, tired but in good spirits. When we arrived back at the hotel, Linda had recovered significantly to have made us all a lunch of sandwiches which we vacuumed up enthusiastically.

The afternoon was again frittered away in the hotel lobby, drinking beers served by the accommodating staff. Henry joined us to tell us that Martha had been trying to get through. We managed to make a phone call back to Action Aid HQ who informed us that members of two local AIDS projects would be meeting us at the hotel at 8 in the morning. We felt pleased that Action Aid had provided some links to local community projects we passed, but Steve was typically impatient about having our early start curtailed.

As we sat killing time in the hotel lobby we observed some of our fellow guests with interest. Many of them wore suits and looked like relatively wealthy businessmen or government dignitaries. One young wealthy Malawian, buoyed evidently by several more green beers than were prudent, joined us in conversation. He couldn't believe that John and Steve were father and son and both enjoying a beer together.

"In our culture", he slurred loudly, "It is just not done! I cannot drink with my father and he would never drink with me! It is just not done!"

He laughed and shook our hands enthusiastically before walking away, shaking his head and muttering to himself "it is just not done!"

Dinner was a delicious vegetable curry. Linda was the only team member who still worried about the contents of our food and she picked at hers suspiciously before managing a few mouthfuls. The rest of us ate heartily and washed it all down with more green beer. The alcohol had obviously made Pete feel a little frivolous and he beckoned for our waiter to approach as we finished our meal. He produced a note from his wallet and thrust it into the young man's hand. The waiter stood motionless before a look of dawning realisation and joy spread across his features like an opening flower.

He staggered over to the corner of the dining hall where some of his colleagues were gathered and they all stared wide-eyed in amazement at the note he unfurled in front of them. There was a collective drawing of breath before the kitchen staff were called in to clamour around the lucky waiter, who was now laughing and hi-fiving his buddies with gleeful abandon.

Steve and I exchanged a puzzled glance. "How much did you give him?" I enquired.

"10 Dollars" replied Pete. "A bit much I know, but I'm feeling generous, and these guys have been doing a really good job. They deserve it"

"They do indeed" I replied, "but 10 bucks is probably about a week's wages for those waiters!" I looked around again and saw the joyful commotion Pete had created continuing around the young worker, whose eyes were still fixated on the Greenback he held in front of his face. I couldn't begrudge him his moment of happiness. And it was a great feeling for us to be in such a privileged position to bestow such a blessing on another human being.

"10 Dollars?" chipped in John Mac. "That could mend their roof!"

CHAPTER 13 THEY THINK IT'S ALL OVER...

“Can I help you Sir?” grinned the immaculately attired concierge as I entered the lobby. Another keen employee opened the door to the refectory with a fawning bow. I smiled, recalling the events of the previous evening, but didn’t have any spare change about me to replicate another surprise emolument. Creating one lucky winner of the Mazungu Lottery was one thing, but encouraging an army of sycophantic servants was an unwarranted consequence of Pete’s generosity we hadn’t bargained for.

We breakfasted early to create a window of time to spend with the youth groups that Martha had arranged for us to meet. They arrived at about 7.30; an untidy assembly of mostly teenaged boys, many dressed in familiar European football kits. We shook hands and exchanged names and then, probably due to shyness on our part, produced a ball and initiated a kick around in the inn car park.

It is a very male urge to replace verbal communication with joint activity. Women love to extol the virtues of idle chit-chat and conversation, but I put my faith firmly in that universal male default; the cave-man instinct for action over protraction when it comes to successfully forging relationships. And when the barriers of language and culture are raised, physical communication can speak volumes. I swear we learnt more about those kids and them about us in half an hour of knocking a

football around, than if we had spent an hour with them in stilted conversation.

To you my friend in the Liverpool top. You're a confident lad, nonchalantly flicking the ball up on to your knee. A couple of cheeky tricks too; showing us your flair and creativity? You've lobbed it to your mate in the beanie hat. He's trapped it and passed it on in one smooth movement. He's no-nonsense that kid, doesn't say much, must be a team player. The ball is with the short kid with the grin now. He's doing keep-ups with his right foot. Come on. No hogging the ball now. He's a bit of a show-off this one, wants to please. He's flipped it on to his left foot but his control has let him down. Gutted, he's all mouth! Pete knocks it straight back to him. He tries the trick again and this time succeeds. We applaud his courage. He smiles broadly and takes a bow. The ball is coming to me now. What am I going to do? I want to show my calm confidence with a neat piece of control and a languid chip to Steve. The ball bounces awkwardly off the cracked concrete but Steve has time to readjust. He's quick and adaptable is Steve. Who's this joining the circle? It's the new kid - John McCarthy. What's he going to be like? The ball comes to him. He stretches out an ungainly limb. The ball slices off his left foot into the road. I glance at my friend in the Liverpool top who smiles.

Of course it's tongue-in-cheek to take this metaphor to its limits, but as a teacher, I see the truth of it at work every day. For a schoolboy, there are few disputes that can't be solved through competition, even in the form of a fight. Action over protraction is the harsh but fair law of the playground for an eleven year old boy. In my experience, arguments between girls tend to be harder to resolve and more likely to fester and grow through the "she said, he said" gossip of the locker room. It may be a cliché, but sport is a universal language that can rarely be misinterpreted.

Sometimes of course, verbal communication is indispensable, particularly when it comes to organising something as complex as

an international charity event, and there were times I wished Steve had been a better conversationalist on the phone to Martha. If he had, the confusion that followed our kick-a-bout probably would not have occurred.

As usual Steve's brevity on the phone and gruff impatience on the day led to a few embarrassing moments and a rather abrupt end to the gathering. It seemed the boys from the youth club had turned up expecting to play a full game of football with us. Steve however was itching to get on with the challenge. He quickly formed an impromptu ceremony and presented FA t-shirts to each of the boys and a ball for the youth group. The boys clapped politely and looked pleased with their gifts, if a little bewildered that their morning with the Kick 4 Malawi Team had ended after a half-hour kick-a-bout before 8am. It was only later that we realised they had walked 5 miles for their t-shirts. Hopefully they had been worth the walk.

Henry had arrived surreptitiously and silently packed up the van while we were kicking the ball around. Linda had again decided to stay behind at the hotel for the day; ironically the team member most wary of the food had become its only casualty. Just as we were leaving, a man led a group of girls in through the gates of the hotel. As we passed him in the van, a look of anguish soured his features. Like the boys youth group, his girls had been walking for hours from the surrounding villages to meet with us. For a second Steve tried to justify our early departure, claiming that we needed to keep on with the challenge, but on seeing the faces of the disappointed girls, common sense prevailed and we stopped the van to greet the late arrivals.

Again a muted air of embarrassment descended on Steve's second hurried presentation of the morning as we quickly shook the hand of each girl and shoved a football shirt into it. More bewilderment as we sped off to begin another day's running, and more regret that we hadn't taken another opportunity to spend

time with the people we were aiming to help. As Pete summed up to the camera when we arrived at our starting point;

“It was a bit disappointing we couldn’t spend more time with them, but life goes on, and so does the challenge. Let’s get it done.”

It put in a nutshell Steve’s mindset. He was here to do a challenge and to raise money. He wasn’t here to forge links with communities or meet with different projects. He wasn’t as socially adept as his younger brother and he didn’t pretend to be. There was a job to be done, a challenge to be met, and as ever, Steve was impatient to get it over with. As Pete finished his piece to camera, in the background Steve kicked off the fifth marathon of the challenge. He dribbled past a man with a scythe cutting back the long grass at the side of the road. The man looked up from his work and called out a puzzled exclamation. Steve flashed a wave of acknowledgement and pressed on. He had no intention of stopping for a chat.

The boys pushed onwards through Nkhamenga into the Northern territory, steadily getting closer to the mountains that loomed ahead of us. At the foot of the Viphya Range, the rough and ready grasslands to our left turned into a flat and landscaped green. It took less than 10 seconds before the hoards of children came teaming towards us from the neat looking school building that nestled 100 yards from the roadside. The children, screaming as they ran, kept coming in their droves and we could do little but stare in amazement at the sight of hundreds of youngsters running towards us.

We had arrived at the Kapirimnyanga Primary School, a successful new school, built to provide an education for children within a 20 mile radius. And believe me, there were evidently a lot of kids in the vicinity. Many of them were dressed in striking aqua marine and magenta uniforms, but most wore the rag-tag hand-me downs they had inherited from countless siblings and

older relatives. Before the hurtling children reached us we shook hands with some older teenagers who were chatting by the side of the road, nonchalantly chewing sugar cane. They hi-fived us eagerly, grins of recognition puncturing their cool exteriors. They seemed to know exactly what we were up to dribbling a football past their local school at 9:30 on a Wednesday morning.

It looked as though the older boys were employed by the school in some capacity as when the younger children arrived they formed a human cordon in an attempt to maintain some order. It was without success and chaos ruled the ecstatic children now surrounding the 4x4. I glanced over at Steve, who, perhaps still feeling guilty over the incident at the hotel, capitulated with a sigh; "Let's roll with it" he said, and we all left the vehicle to be swept along by the waves of delighted children who cheered and laughed around us. Not even Steve could escape a conversation or two this time.

By this point in the journey our second ball had developed a slow puncture and so we decided to donate it to the school – once again offloading our valuable rubbish onto a grateful population. I grabbed some pens, pencils and notebooks from the back of the van and ran out to join the others. We made our way towards the little white cluster of classrooms across the field while the children made a joyful leaping circle around us. Pete started a chant of "Shup! Shup! Shup!" as we ambled along with the kids who repeated the deafening chorus over and over as they jumped; their upturned thumbs outstretched in front of them.

The children led us on a prolonged tour of the main school building where we were formally greeted by two elderly gentlemen we assumed to be in charge. The men, in their 60's or 70's, were probably the oldest people we had seen since our arrival. Henry later explained that one consequence of the AIDS crisis was a lack of qualified teachers. The government had been

forced to lure retired teachers back into employment with cash incentives.

One of the men was dressed in a shabby suit, while the other wore a somewhat more colourful ensemble, of the shell variety. I addressed the man in the shirt and tie, presuming he was the Head Teacher, but I was wrong. The happy gent in the tracksuit introduced himself as the Principal and thus corrected I presented my modest selection of pens, pencils and notebooks to him. It wasn't much, but looking around the Head's office, it was clear that the school was hopelessly under-resourced for such huge numbers of children. The shelves were stocked with a tatty selection of text books and supplies that looked over-used to the point of redundancy. Whatever we could give was gratefully received and we felt humbled by their modest acceptance.

The two elderly teachers asked us to sign the visitors register before giving us a brief history of the school and a short tour. We apologised for interrupting lessons and causing such chaos as we left the cool dark interior of the office to rejoin the fun in the sun outside. The noise and excitement had continued unabated. We found John Fleming sharing a joke with a group of youngsters as he tried to explain more about the challenge. "We're kicking a ball to Mzuzu!" he repeated enthusiastically. Oh that old chestnut.

Srini and John Macarthy were also being led around the school by several chattering children and were basking in the extraordinary excitement of the occasion. It was an incredible visit, but remembering our mission, we slowly made our way back through the whooping crowd towards the van and Henry, who, resting casually on the bonnet, was witnessing the occasion in an altogether more professional manner. With the choruses of "Shup" still ringing around us we clambered back into the van. One of the children lifted a spherical bundle of cloth and string; a home-made football that had served its time. Pete and I gave each other a knowing wink and taking it from the boy's hands,

replaced it with our patched up leather ball. As I bent down to shake a morass of proffered hands, I made the mistake of showing the camera view-finder to a hundred keen eyes. I was immediately engulfed in a sea of youngsters all clamouring to see the mesmerising images of themselves. I had to be hauled unceremoniously into the van before I was swept away.

As we yelled our goodbyes, some of the older school prefects were on hand to shoo the youngsters back to their classrooms. Armed with sticks and flexible branches they whipped the feet of the cheering crowds until they began to scuttle back to their lessons. It was a remarkable experience for all of us, and energised by the emotions of the moment, we drove on.

Steve ran on towards the Viphyra Range and began the slow and winding climb into the Kahingina Forest Reserve. Our surroundings seemed to be rapidly changing about us. The dusty roadside fields were turning into carpets of trees and green vegetation. Henry said we could encounter baboons and leopards in the forests, but Steve was firmly focussed on the difficult task of kicking a ball up and down a series of steep inclines. It was certainly something we hadn't really considered until now, but controlling a ball on a slope is a very hard thing to do, especially when your limbs are aching from 5 back to back marathons. Steve struggled forward, but on several occasions his control let him down and the ball ended up rolling down a grassy verge or out into oncoming traffic.

After about 10 miles of gruelling undulation we climbed to a plain with kopje peaks either on side and passed through a lively market town called Jenda. The dwelling was on the Zambian border and there were plentiful supplies of fruit and vegetables for sale on the wooden market stalls we passed. Earthy sweet potatoes, green tomatoes and golden sweetcorn, all arrayed to attract the senses. There were rails of clothing, colourful t-shirts and dresses for those who had more money to spend on just the

bare essentials, and as in all parts of the world, the market traders were vocal in their cheery attempts to promote their wares. People of all shapes and sizes, rich and poor, Christian and Moslem waved at us, briefly distracted by our presence. The market was a far bigger attraction. We saw women carrying rice and drying maize meal flour by the roadside, the small babies on their backs clinging on for dear life as their mothers worked. There didn't seem to be too much in the way of grinding poverty here but the exotic scene was still a long way away from Sainsbury's on a wet Wednesday in Southampton.

As he began his fourth leg of the day, Steve met a man called James Chilwa who accompanied him on a bicycle for a few miles. He was a bricklayer who had trained in Blantyre and was now working in Jenda. He spoke the local dialect of Chitumbuka as opposed to the language of the Chewa tribe to the South, but his English was good enough for Steve to enjoy a joke or two as they slowly made progress along the now quiet highway. Henry said the language differences between the tribes were slight, rather like the differing accents of the 4 home countries back in the UK. As we progressed northward, the Tumbuka appeared to be a less exuberant people than the Chewa. They were friendly and welcoming, but in a definitely more reserved way.

There were more stops to reward local children with sweets along the route, but after a time we passed by the roadside settlements and climbed further into the hills of Northern Malawi. The vegetation around us was lush and green as the road undulated for miles ahead, forever rising in and out of view as it meandered away into the distance. As we drove higher into the mountains, Pete and Steve ran to the laconic sounds of Jack Johnson which resonated from the small tape player Pete had commandeered in the Toyota.

By the end of the day the lush forests receded, allowing us to look down upon vast grassland plains stretching out as far as the

eye could see. It was still hot, but a blustery wind blew cotton cluster clouds across the sky, casting dappled patterns of light on the savannah below. The view was irresistible and all the crew left the support vehicle to wonder at such majestic scenery. Scanning the horizon with John's binoculars I could spot the far off fires smoking from an assortment of villages dotted about the plain. Every now and then I caught sight of a small child running naked between huts or a woman toiling in the small adjacent gardens, but the men seemed harder to spot. Perhaps, like James Chilwa they were cycling to and from far off destinations where the work was more abundant. Or just perhaps they were the absent victims of a disease that preyed upon the poor and uneducated in this beautiful yet tainted corner of Africa.

As we approached the last 2 mile stretch of the day, I decided to run ahead of the group to find Steve. I caught up with him on a downhill stretch just as he mis-controlled the ball and let it run away from him down the roadside verge. Steve's tired legs shakily negotiated the steep bank as he went to retrieve the ball. As he did so the dry earth gave way and he put out an arm to break his fall. When he rose to his feet, with a grimace of pain and embarrassment, he had a large thorn attached to his forearm. The twig had pierced his wrist but had luckily missed a vein and Steve promptly pulled out the intruder and stemmed the small trickle of blood with his t-shirt. Srinu was on call to disinfect the wound and patch it up, but the injury was not as serious as it had first appeared. By 2pm we had finished the marathon and decided to stop next to a small market to buy some fresh vegetables for our lunch. There were plentiful supplies of sweet potato, cassava, mango, avocado, banana and tomato on offer, but this didn't stop several portly women scurrying back to some surrounding huts to bring us more choice. We settled on buying some juicy green tomatoes and bananas to munch on our long journey back to Kasungu. The fruit was carefully deposited into small plastic

bags which, bizarrely enough, were decorated with pictures of a fierce looking Sylvester Stallone advertising Rambo III.

Srini cleaned the fruit with a disinfectant wipe and distributed it to the team members who slumped tiredly in the back of the Toyota, having completed the fifth of their 10 marathon task. It was early afternoon and the wind that had been scattering innocent looking wisps across the bright sky for much of the day now ushered in a blanket of forbidding rain clouds.

As the first few spots dashed against the windscreen, Henry suddenly applied the breaks and the 4x4 came to a stop. Coming toward us along the road was a large slow moving group of people. It was a funeral procession and Henry motioned us to put away our cameras as the ceremony approached. He left the van but told us in a whisper that we should stay inside. At the front of the march were two oxen pulling a cart which held an open coffin. Behind it an entire village filed past sombrely, as an elderly man at the head of the cortege began a call and response exchange with a chorus of anguished voices behind him. The silence inside the Toyota was punctuated only by the harsh tapping of the rain as it began to pore and the muffled cries from the grief stricken village as it slowly crept by. None of us had seen anything quite like it. We knew nothing of the circumstances of the death. We hadn't known the life that had passed on. But as the darkening sky mirrored the sorrow of that small community, it seemed likely that this was another life cut all too short by poverty or disease. It seemed even more likely that this was a community weary of such recurring scenes.

Back at Kasungu Inn hundreds of small frogs leapt in the puddles that formed in the potholed car park. Linda had been reading all day and with the rain finally subsiding, jumped at the opportunity to go with Henry and Srini to the local store to stock up on provisions for the coming days. After the inevitable mid

afternoon cat-nap I wandered into the lobby to be greeted by an excited Pete.

“They’re showing the Champion’s League Final in the hotel bar!” he exclaimed raising a fist of triumph. “One of the porters told me! He’s going to reserve us some seats!”

“I bet he is mate” I replied dryly, “he’s after a ten dollar tip!”

Just then, another hotel waiter with wide eyes approached offering his services. I winked at Pete.

“Round of Green beers?”

Being able to watch the pinnacle of the European football season unfold on a TV screen in the heart of Africa was indeed an unexpected treat. We hadn’t anticipated catching the FA Cup and now we were sitting down preparing for a mouth-watering second course of football. The soccer showcase of the season was made all the more appealing as Liverpool had triumphed against the odds, overcoming Chelsea and Juventus to progress to their sixth European Cup Final, their first in 20 years. They would be playing Milan, themselves six time winners of the coveted trophy. As Steve and the two Johns joined us in the hotel lobby, we began to salivate over the prospect of football and beer, promising ourselves a temporary episode of “rejoicing” to mark the half way point in the challenge.

Suddenly everything went dark. The passing rain storm had caused a power cut and it seemed our lads night out had been foiled before it had even begun. We sat and waited for our eyes to readjust to the blackness around us. They didn’t. Light pollution in the UK is such that it very rarely gets pitch black anywhere. Even on a cloudy night in the countryside, the weak glow of a nearby town usually seeps onto the horizon to provide some point of reference in the gloom. But we waited and waited and still couldn’t see. Fumbling our way outside to retrieve a torch from the chalet was nearly impossible. Under the starless sky it was black, frighteningly so. Luckily the darkness was only

temporary thanks to the hardworking staff who cranked up a generator to provide some temporary light before the mains were restored. When the lights came on John Mac was absent from our table, and for a second I wondered whether he'd found his way to the hotel basement to lend his undoubted expertise. Instead I turned to see him shining his torch on the dodgy roofing tiles of the lobby porch.

We tucked into another delicious vegetable curry before retiring to the bar where Henry had already arrived and was chatting excitedly to some privileged locals who had been allowed in to watch the game with the hotel staff and guests. Some plastic chairs had been arranged in front of the small 14 inch TV that was bracketed high up on the wall of the bar. Already it was getting quite busy. The waiter had reserved us some seats and speedily refilled our glasses. By the time the game kicked off I was already feeling a little light-headed. The Malawians around us were passionate and well informed about the two teams – support was split 50/50, but whether this apparent loyalty was driven by a genuine appetite for European football or came down to which side they put their money on, was a matter for debate. As Steve waited at the bar, a man approached him and grinning exclaimed; “I support your team, buy me a beer” Steve shook his hand and passed him a bottle; football and beer; the two great levellers.

The game did not start well for the Liverpool supporters. Milan scored after just three minutes of play, the 37 year old veteran defender Paolo Maldini sending the Milan supporters in the bar delirious with excitement. The Italian side dominated the game and by half-time, two more goals from Hernan Crespo had put the result beyond doubt. It was 3-0 to Milan and as the only English in the room, and honorary Scousers for the night, it was obvious that we were becoming the butt of the bar room jokes. Several of the Milan fans were slapping each other on the back in anticipation of their winnings. Henry, always a keen supporter of the English game shook his head apologetically; “Liverpool have

been disappointing” he noted, the usual flash of white teeth hidden for a change.

It was 9 o’clock and for a few minutes we contemplated getting an early night. It seemed obvious that the game was over as a spectacle and we had to be up early the next day to complete another marathon. But the atmosphere in the bar was so electric we decided to at least enjoy a few more beers with Henry and the local football lovers. Srini and John McCarthy decided to call it a day. John F did the same only to return 10 minutes later, explaining that he just couldn’t resist the lure of football.

Of course, what we witnessed next was one of the all time greatest comebacks in football history. Within the space of just six minutes, a header from Steven Gerrard, having a phenomenal game in midfield, followed by a strike from Vladimir Smicer had brought Liverpool back into the game. Then the superb Gerrard was brought down in the penalty box and Xabi Alonso converted the spot kick. The turnaround was incredible and had us all enthralled. The bar was buzzing and Milan supporters, suddenly quiet were beginning to get very nervous; their money no longer looking quite as safe.

3-3 at the final whistle and with Liverpool dominating the extra time period but failing to capitalise, the game went to the ultimate drama of a penalty shoot-out competition. Liverpool’s goalkeeper, Jerzy Dudek, having made an incredible save in extra time to deny Shevchenko continued his form in the shootout, saving two of Milan’s early penalties. Then with Liverpool ahead, Shevchenko had to convert his penalty to throw Milan a lifeline. Dudek did his best to put him off, raising his hands over his head repeatedly and shimmying from side to side to create an illusion of omnipresence. Shevchenko lost his nerve, firing weekly at Dudek who saved to his right, setting the Liverpool fans delirious with unrestrained celebration.

Steve was the first to anticipate the save and flung his arms in the air with a primal cheer. The bar then became a heaving

dichotomy of excitement and disappointment. Henry began pumping his massive fists above his head, mimicking Pele's famous goal-scoring celebration. A large Malawian in front of me pulled his shirt off and began whirling it over his head; another was dancing up and down the room with joy. Still more hugged and hi-fived us as Pete caught the celebrations on the camcorder. Slightly less visible in the throng were the Milan supporters who shook their heads and barked irritable jibes at their gloating compatriots who could only laugh at their fall from grace.

At midnight, heads still whirring from a potent mix of alcohol and elation we trudged across the hotel forecourt to our beds, happy that we had witnessed one of the most remarkable games of football in the most unforgettable of settings.

CHAPTER 14 LUWAWA

“There is an old Malawian story of a cow, a goat and a dog” began Henry as we waved goodbye to Arthur and Rashid for the last time and sped along the highway out of Kasungu. In the back of the ATV I glanced at Steve through bleary eyes and raised a curious brow. Up to this point in the trip Henry had been almost painfully shy. It was good to see him relaxed in our company enough to begin a conversation. Surprising as well, considering the amount of beer we had plied him with the night before.

“I used to tell it to my children whenever we went on a long journey” Henry continued with a smile.

“One day, a driver offered a lift to a cow. The cow was grateful to the driver and paid him expenses for the journey. The driver took him the whole way and dropped him off at his destination; a dairy farm in the next village. “Thank you” said the cow gratefully. Further along the road, the driver encountered a goat who also wished to travel. The driver picked up the goat and took him to where he wanted to go. But as he was dropped off, the goat left the vehicle without paying and ran away. Now the driver needed money for petrol and so picked up another hitchhiker – this time a dog. The driver charged the dog 2 Kwacha for the journey, but the dog only had a 5 Kwacha note. The driver grabbed the note and sped away quickly, leaving the dog behind, seething with anger.”

Henry turned to us smiling like a wise old sage as he continued to add an explanation to the story; “This is why when a driver passes a cow on the road it is nonchalant, because it does not owe any money; its debts have been paid. However if a driver passes a goat on his journey, it will run away, because it owes the driver money. A dog on the other hand, will chase the car and bark because it is owed money.”

We all smiled back at Henry appreciating the logic of the fable, except for John McCarthy, who commented dryly;

“Henry, in our country, cows, goats and dogs don’t talk.”

It was an overcast day, even a little chilly as we wound our way into the hilly central territory; looking for the small market town that indicated the day’s starting point. Apart from Henry’s story, the hour long drive was tedious and we snoozed in the back of the van sombrely trying to refocus on our task. Only Linda, recovered after her two days of illness was enjoying the journey. She helped her brothers to rub a potent smelling mixture of Deep Heat and Ibuprophen gel into their weary limbs, knowing that this leg of the journey would prove to be the hardest of the challenge. We were well into the mountains and the road began to narrow and wind around some precariously craggy hillsides.

It was 8.45 by the time Pete delivered his customary pre-marathon piece to camera.

“Hello, David!” He half grinned, half grimaced through a haze of hangover, keen as ever to take on the role of intrepid sports reporter. “After the excitement and mayhem of the Champions League Final last night and the sinking of a few beers, I’m feeling slightly dehydrated. I think Henry feels the same! He flashed a cheeky grin across to the van. “We bought him a plethora of beers last night! The weather’s looking a bit ominous – plenty of clouds in the sky and there could be some rain later. It’s a bit windy but apart from that, probably ideal

conditions for running. Anyway, we'll see how it goes and crack on!" With that he clapped his hands and kicked off marathon dribble number six.

600 metres along the road he was joined by a spindly legged man who danced with joy when he saw Pete approaching. Surely it was too early for him to have been intoxicated? Perhaps like us he was still wearing off the effects of an alcoholic night out.

Pete ran the first two mile stretch in his sweatshirt such was the chilly wind that raked across the hills as the rain clouds threatened. Tempted as they were, they never opened and the day remained dry as the kick-runners took it in turns to push the third battered football up a steep series of inclines. There were some spectacular views to be had as the M1 narrowed and became potholed, making conditions more treacherous. With huge tobacco trucks hurtling around the blind corners, it was decided that the runners should take to a small path away from the roadside which slowed them down considerably. The path was bumpy and balanced precariously along the side of a rocky slope for several miles. Both brothers stumbled repeatedly, recovering each time with a shrug of the shoulders to retrieve the errant ball. By the end of the morning the sun was beginning to mop up the remnant of cloud and the boys were able to return to the main road as the twisting inclines reached their peak and the road unravelled downhill, stretching out like a sunbathing snake into the distance.

It seemed like the perfect time for me to blow the cobwebs away and join Pete on his second two mile stretch of the day. A nice gentle downhill slope – thank you very much - I thought to myself as I limbered up at the change over point. Sensing my over confidence and feeling good after his first run, Pete decided to stretch his legs and push the pace up a gear. As we passed a series of dwellings, he barely noticed the waving villagers. Increasing in speed for the first mile and a half I somehow managed to stay with him, but as Henry overtook us (a sign that

the changeover point was imminent) and pulled the Toyota to the curb about 800 metres ahead, Pete managed another incredible gear change. I flailed behind him puffing uncontrollably as my lungs screamed for air and my legs turned to jelly. Pete had blown me away, and he had done it, most gallingly of all, with a football at his feet.

As I approached the vehicle, bent double and sweating profusely, Pete swigged nonchalantly from a water bottle as if he had taken a brisk walk. Steve handed me a bottle and looked impressed.

“Well done Digger, you did a couple of 7 minute miles there!” Speechless and close to retching point I nodded my head, continuing to heave more oxygen into my lungs. Pete answered for me;

“Yeah I felt good, so I decided to stretch it out a bit. I fear I may have broken Dave though!”

He was right. Feeling faint I clambered into the Toyota and finally catching my breath, delivered a faltering interview to the camera;

“Awesome, just awesome...” I panted, “I thought I was fit, but to do that six and a half times a day with a ball at their feet is just incredible.” I was now realising that Steve’s early decision to omit me from the physical element of the task had been a wise one. He and Pete had to be in excellent shape to run 13 miles day in day out. I was no-where near their fitness level, but the reality that we were over a mile above sea level, high on the Viphya plateau, gave me a convenient excuse. I told myself I wasn’t used to the altitude.

By 11 O’clock the thick *brachystegia* woodland had given way to the exotic pine plantations of the Viphya Forest; the largest man made evergreen plantation in the world. We had also passed a small dirt track heading east from the main road which led to the

Luwawa Forest Lodge – our next accommodation. Climbing higher once more with the sun gaining strength so that we could see shimmering waves of light dancing off the individual leaves across the canopy below us, Steve ran through a series of small wooden homesteads camouflaged by the roadside trees. I wondered out loud who actually owned the land in Malawi. Henry glanced across at me and replied that the land in rural areas is owned by the village chief. If a villager wants to build a house, he must first seek permission from his chief. In towns and cities however, the land is owned by town councils and any building projects need backing from town assemblies. The Viphya Forest, along with other commercial areas such as the national parks are owned by the government.

Henry took a curious second glance at me. It was the first time he had noticed my hair since it had been unceremoniously shaved. For the previous 3 days my khaki hat, now turning orange with the red dust from the roadside, had been glued to my head. Now, still recovering after my run, I was simply too hot to wear it and for the first time Henry could see the uneven stubble that covered my head like a burnt field of straw. “Ah you have had a haircut!” he noted, his observation punctuated by that infectious Eddie Murphy laugh. “You remind me of an old friend of mine, oh what was his name?” Henry’s permanently broad smile was momentarily checked by a second of forgetfulness; “Lima Scott! His name was Lima Scott! Yes you look just like him!” he chuckled to himself. Pete tapped me on the shoulder and pointed a mocking finger; “Lima Scott!” he echoed, delighted to have found me another nickname.

Henry’s friend, we discovered much later was a British mountain biker he had guided on a charity ride across the country a few years earlier. The fact that his first name was in fact Liam and not Lima made little difference to the Fleming brothers, if anything Henry’s error added to the humour. I was now labelled Lima Scott for the rest of the trip.

The people we met on day six of the challenge seemed to be more subdued than on previous days. Two young boys who hopped and danced as we crawled slowly past their hut proved to be the exceptions, but seeing 16 pairs of foreign eyes upon them made the boys shy and, grinning sheepishly, they turned to run inside. We were in a very rural part of the country and it was obvious that this community was desperately poor. By midday we had run out of sweets and treats to give people so we started to hand out biro pens instead. One girl, studying for her “Star 5” at Primary level seemed utterly gob smacked at her surprise gift. She held it in her hands disbelievingly and expressed her thanks through the widest smile we had seen on the trip.

As we progressed through another series of steep and bumpy inclines Henry instinctively knew there was something wrong with the handling of his vehicle. “We have a flat tyre” he announced. Sure enough, pulling onto the next flat grassy verge, we found the Toyota’s rear left tyre slowly hissing to its saggy conclusion. While Steve continued to pound the pavement up ahead, no doubt confused as to our whereabouts, the two Johns helped Henry to change the wheel while Pete and I crashed by the roadside with Steve’s old and battered nylon stringed guitar to lighten the mood with a few songs.

Despite the help on offer, Henry had plenty of experience to draw on when it came to changing the tyres of his truck, and began jacking up the all terrain vehicle as if he had done it a hundred times. The job was made significantly harder when unbelievably he managed to snap his monkey wrench trying to undo the stiff bolts on the wheel. He began sweating profusely with the extra effort he now had to muster to complete the job and we were all very impressed at the speed in which he achieved it. Having the spare tyre on and connected within 15 minutes, his proud new Kick 4 Malawi T-shirt now dirtied with oil and sweat, Henry ushered us back into the ATV with his trade mark grin

now flagging, to complete the remaining few miles of the day's challenge. Steve, guessing that there had been a hold up, had stopped at around where he thought his 2 mile stretch should have ended and waited for the pickup. He was astonished to realise Henry had changed a tyre so quickly.

We finished the day's running at the curious landmark of an old burnt out car and headed back to the crook in the road that led to Luwawa camp. The pitted track we turned onto took us further into the heart of the thick pine forests of the Viphya reserve. The towering green canopy above us cast an early twilight on our journey as we rocked and bumped along in second gear, seriously concerned that another flat tyre could spell serious problems. For about 30 minutes we crawled along the tiny path slightly sceptical that any sort of habitation could possibly be at the end of it, let alone an internationally renowned hotel complex.

Eventually the Toyota growled out of the dark trees into a bright and green clearing where a collection of sandy coloured brick buildings heralded our arrival at Luwawa. There was an air of peace that seemed to envelope the surroundings like a soft pillowed enclave in the heart of the forbidding forest. Only the chirrup of birdsong indicated the presence of life as we looked in vain for the entrance to the hotel or a porter to help us unload our tightly packed belongings from the roof rack. Eventually two young men scurried to help Henry pass down our luggage from the roof of the 4x4 while another showed us to our lodgings.

We soon discovered that Land and Lakes had booked us 4 chalets instead of 4 rooms, and with no other guests staying at the hotel we chose to enjoy the unexpected opulence. The self contained bungalow apartments were spacious and comfortable and Srini and Linda decided to make use of a small 2 story cottage away from the main building as a romantic retreat. With the bags unpacked and the two Johns setting up camp; one

finding water to make tea, the other worrying about a lack of mosquito nets in his bungalow, Steve and I took the time to marvel at our surroundings.

In front of the hotel's main building a lush sculptured lawn sloped majestically down to a vast reservoir which sparkled under the now pulsating sun. Flanking the water, bristling woodland stood on guard as if protecting the beauty of the enclave. Above the trees a collection of eagles circled imperiously on the warm thermals, their languorous oval paths being pierced now and again by noisy arrows of ducks. Closer to us among the immaculately clipped bushes and flower beds, the array of life was no less spectacular. Jet black Sunbirds flitted in and out of the shrubs snapping their long curved beaks to claim the insects that buzzed in the hazy glow of afternoon. Canaries darted clumsily; blowing their cover with outrageous bursts of yellow. Mousebirds waited patiently on the tops of the cherry trees while African Pied Wagtails prowled the lawns beneath them, their tails dipping like metronomes. We all felt a certain euphoria about our luck in finding such a place. The beautiful vista invited admiration and as the minutes rolled by we remained transfixed. It was the most tranquil place I had ever been.

After a simple lunch brought to us on the hotel veranda, Steve called a meeting to announce to an excited crew that, as we were well ahead of schedule and in such a stunning location, we should have a rest day from the challenge. As we had arranged for the press and Action Aid to meet us in Mzuzu on the 30th, there was no point getting there a day early.

The remainder of the afternoon was whiled away lazily, basking in the relative luxury of our surroundings. One thing not quite so glamorous about the hotel however, was the colour of its water – a dark murky brown liquid which spluttered noisily from the taps. We found out later that it was pumped up to the hotel directly from the reservoir through only the most rudimentary of filters. The brown water didn't put Steve off

though and he filled a warm bath of the stuff in which to soak his weary limbs. He said it was absolute bliss.

As the curtain of evening fell on our idyllic scene, a myriad of midges and other biting insects came alive as the heat of the day began to dissipate. High up in the mountains the air was thin and became chilly very quickly, so we retired to the main lodge to gather in front of a roaring log fire and ordered some drinks. The staff were friendly, the atmosphere was warm and relaxing, in fact, just like an advert for the green beer we were drinking, everything was just perfect. Before the evening meal arrived we were joined by a genial man sporting a trimmed beard and a relaxed manner. He greeted us warmly in a watered down Yorkshire accent, wishing us a pleasant stay and introducing himself as the proprietor. His name was George Wardlow.

George was a former teacher from Barnsley who had come to Malawi 17 years previously with his wife and young son to teach in Blantyre. He had stumbled across Luwawa Forest Lodge in 1998 whilst backpacking through the northern territory and was instantly struck by its beauty and potential for tourism. At the time it was owned by the Malawian Government having been built in 1984 by the workers constructing the M1 for use as a social club. George wrote to the government asking whether the building could be leased and after a year of bargaining they agreed. George set about turning it into a very British style holiday resort. Billed as an outdoor activity centre, visitors can go canoeing in the lake, mountain biking or walking in the forest and do a variety of other activities.

The food at the hotel was designed for an English palate and we were amazed at how it had arrived on our plates in such a remote location, as if flown in special delivery from Yorkshire. For dinner we had cottage pie and fresh vegetables for the main course and chocolate cake and custard for desert. George ate with us and it was just as if we were popping round for tea in his own anglicised corner of Africa. Henry also joined us at the

dinner table. He seemed as delighted with the prospect of a day off as we were. Having exerted himself changing the burst tyre, he now needed time to go and fix it (nothing is discarded remember in Malawi) and the rest day would give him plenty of opportunity to do so. He told us in his shy way that he regularly visited Luwawa, roughly about 5 times a year as he ferried tourists and safari parties from one hotel to the next. Henry seemed to know George well and the pair greeted each other as old friends. Despite the emptiness of the hotel, and our invitation to join us, Henry again seemed content to stay in cheaper accommodation – the staff barracks nearby that housed the 15 workers that George employed, mostly from the surrounding Tumbuka villages.

“We’re a little bit overstaffed at the moment as you can see” said George with a nod towards the collection of groundsmen, cooks and bar staff that were milling aimlessly around the hotel lobby. “But we are expecting a group of Australian backpackers to arrive next week. The season doesn’t really get going until June.” He added with an unconcerned smile. George Wardlow appeared to have the best job in the world.

After dinner George joined us for a drink in front of the fire and the conversation drifted from the innocuous to a serious discussion on the problems of Malawi. Our host seemed to think that irrigation was the biggest challenge facing the small but populous country. Malawi has plenty of water and lots of rainfall during the rainy season but it is not shared or distributed efficiently. George explained that native attitudes are such that even the government believes that rainfall is in the lap of the gods and therefore beyond management. But if water supplies could be contained and structures of irrigation improved then more of Malawi’s land could be cultivated and its people fed.

“There’s a big problem here of poor and ineffective government” George continued. “Corruption is rife and the administration is creaming off money in taxes. Tourism could be

harnessed but small businesses are hit by 17.5 % tax. It's killing the goose before it's laid the golden egg!" He added with an exasperated laugh. It was true, from what we'd seen of the country, Malawi could be a major tourist destination.

"People go to Kenya or South Africa or Zambia for their safaris but not many people I know have even heard of Malawi. But this place is incredible – it's so beautiful!" I was gushing now and felt slightly embarrassed as George nodded his approval.

"Yes it is beautiful here. Malawi's a wonderful country and I don't want to appear ungrateful. I guess you could call me a bit of an African cynic!" he said with a wide grin. "There's so much potential here but little being done to harness it. Education has improved over the years, but only because older teachers have been recalled beyond their retirement. There still aren't enough secondary schools and the ones we do have are vastly under resourced. The government just doesn't value its professionals. Doctors and teachers are enticed abroad by the lure of money and opportunities and the government are doing nothing to stop it. Did you know that there are more Malawian doctors in Manchester than there are here in Malawi?! It's a crazy situation – we need them here!"

It was certainly a shocking statistic, but beside me Steve was growing annoyed by the conversation and George's informed but negative opinions.

"From what I've seen though there are a lot of schemes in place that are making a difference right across Africa." countered Steve, wishing to highlight more positive developments. Steve was very knowledgeable about UN plans to tackle global poverty and the British government's commitment to eradicating African debt.

"There do seem to be lots of aid organisations and charity workers here as well" I chipped in, remembering the large group of Americans in Lilongwe, presumably painting their umpteenth silo.

“There is a lot of good work going on here” admitted George, “particularly associated with the church missions, but the NGO’s are generally not well organised and waste vast amounts of money on administrative costs. There are plenty of young, enthusiastic and actually quite arrogant workers arriving every year in Malawi expecting to solve problems in areas where they have no expertise or experience. What is needed is for individual problems to be diagnosed and money given directly to those who can actually make a difference. Skills need to be directed and utilised more effectively.” George added that there were UN programs looking to combine youthful enthusiasm with experienced long term work in the field to combat poverty but that progress was slow. It was comforting for us to remember that all the money we had raised was going directly to a needy project and not a wasteful NGO.

The conversation turned to the people of Malawi and how friendly and welcoming they had been since our arrival. John Fleming said that he had been struck by how happy the people seemed despite their obvious troubles. Henry, quiet until now, explained a little of the Malawian character.

“In Malawian culture,” he said, “people extend a hand of welcome to strangers. We are a proud people, we do not like to take handouts, but we are poor. There is lots of poverty in the rural villages despite the smiles. We have seen many people, especially men in the villages, just sat around doing nothing, but they are not lazy – they cannot find work. Apart from the subsistence farmers, there is a 90% unemployment rate in Malawi.”

Henry went on to explain that the problems with Malawi’s infrastructure were exacerbated by the country’s overpopulation. It has the same amount of people as its neighbour Zambia, but only a fifth of its land area with which to feed them.

Hearing Henry’s quiet but passionate diagnosis of his country’s ills seemed a fitting point to end the conversation and

before attempting to move to lighter issues we all agreed that despite the good work of well meaning charities and individuals, there was much more to be done. Steve reminded us that only 0.7% of UK GDP goes to charity; a pitiful fraction for such a wealthy nation. But despite the doom and gloom, with the Make Poverty History campaign, Live Aid and other awareness movements, it did seem that at least a change in attitudes was in the air.

CHAPTER 15 **REST ON THE SEVENTH DAY**

My neck was aching so I lay down on the cool spongy grass with the creaking crickets to get a better view. Looking up I fell headlong into the universe above me. Never before had the heavens appeared so clear and so alive; the jet blanket firmament sequined with the most exquisite diamonds ever put on display. My head swam in the depth and brilliance of that cloudless African sky, a world away from the dim greys and limp stars on our smoky night time horizons. So this was what the universe really looked like, and it was truly amazing.

With my thin shirt offering scant protection against the coolness of the night, I breathed my own curling exhaust into the atmosphere and watched it dissipate like a fading echo into the vaults of creation. The compelling rhythms of those African drums were still ringing in my ears as I relived my day of rest at Luwawa.

It had begun with the luxury of a lie-in, a warm, if murky shower and a full English breakfast. Steve and Pete, who could never fully relax even when given the opportunity, were itching to take some kayaks out on the reservoir for a paddle. So while the Bandis and the two Johns explored the forest surroundings we ambled through the picturesque undergrowth with paddles in

hand to the planked jetty by the water's edge. As we walked down the hill towards the lake, Steve expressed one or two reservoir reservations;

"I hope there aren't any crocs in there."

"Don't be silly, they're hardly going to allow canoeing on the lake if it was dangerous" responded Pete, who then made the mistake of adding "In any case I asked George last night and he said there wasn't."

Steve laughed. "I'm also slightly concerned about Bilharzia." He admitted.

"Who's Bill Harzia?" I asked naively.

Steve laughed louder; "*It* is a parasitic worm that buries itself under the skin. You can catch it in lakes or reservoirs across Africa."

"Sounds nasty" I said, "and whatever you do, don't wee in the lake. I've heard some horror stories about those spiky little fish that swim up peoples' tadgers." We all winced and broke into more hysterics.

Whatever the potential of beasts both large and small lurking in the shadows, it was an unexpected and no less unfamiliar creature that was to take us by surprise. Down at the water's edge the fibre glass kayaks were upturned and drying out on the jetty and we first had to untie their coarse mooring ropes before flipping them over in preparation for the morning jaunt. As Steve tipped his red Kayak onto its bottom, a swarm of huge flying insects the size of small birds buzzed irritably from their damp hollow nest inside the canoe.

"Urgghh!" we recoiled in revulsion, flapping manically at the creatures that were lazily bumping into our hair and faces like slow ugly pinballs. Carefully, and with trepidation we tipped two more kayaks onto the jetty and stood well back as the hoards of giant dragonflies were released. Studiously making sure our kayaks were empty, we climbed down the jetty steps and

manoeuvred precariously into our vehicles, trying to steady the wobble of light fibre glass on lapping water.

Out on the lake, a blustery breeze rippled the water, making steering problematic and fooling us into assuming that the sun wasn't burning our necks. As we paddled about on the beautiful lake it was difficult to comprehend that this whole area had been sculpted by man. A dammed river had created the reservoir and even its wild and thickly wooded banks were part of a man made conspiracy to tame nature and profit from its resources. Looking back towards the hotel complex, sat imperiously upon its layered gardens, I was awed by the beautiful partnerships that can occasionally be forged between man and nature. Luwawa Forest Lodge was one such harmonious union.

We raced about from one side of the water to the other and the time flew by. After an hour I could definitely feel the sun burning a rash across my neck and shoulders and decided to paddle exhaustedly towards the jetty. Hauling myself and then the fibreglass kayak out of the water and up the wooden ladder onto the platform was a difficult manoeuvre, but managing it, I tipped over the dripping canoe and tied the painter next to the others, wondering how long it would be before it became infested with dragonflies once again. A Yorkshire voice took me by surprise.

“Good fun?”

I turned to find George grinning benevolently as if he had been watching for hours, like God finding pleasure in his creation. “So is there anything else you'd like to do while you're here?” he asked. “We've got mountain bikes to hire and plenty of guided walks into the forests.”

“To be honest, I'll probably take it easy for the rest of the day,” I panted, still exhausted from my exertions, “but knowing these two, they'd probably love a five mile cycle through the woods a bit later!”

As the mid morning sun rose to its full height, George enquired about our challenge and I asked him more about Luwawa and its surroundings. He told me that the area was one of the best bird-watching locations in East Africa and that many tourist twitchers came with solely that in mind. I sheepishly admitted that I was a bit of a closet birdwatcher and would be fascinated to know what sorts of birds could be seen. George offered to lend me a pair of binoculars and a field guide later in the day.

We also chatted about the local Tumbuka villages in and around the Viphya plantation. George revealed that when he had first arrived at Luwawa the local people were struggling; desperately poor and most of the male population were unemployed. He described his good fortune at being able to offer employment opportunities to the tribes. He explained that whenever Western visitors stayed at the Lodge, he gave local villages the chance to come and perform customary dances for the tourists. Collections were held among the visitors to pay the dancers and George would match the amount. It was an exchange that made perfect business sense. Through the dancers Luwawa provided entertainment for its guests and the local tribes earned regular sums of money through the expression of their culture. Taking the onus upon myself to speak for the rest of the team, I jumped at the chance to ask George to bring the dancers to perform for us.

“Well I’ve actually taken the liberty of inviting them already” smiled George. “They’re coming tonight.”

Later in the day the two Johns arrived at the lakeside to join us for a paddle, before we made our way back up the picturesque hill towards the hotel, stopping lazily to fool around with an old rope swing that had been fixed to a platform next to a tree. It felt like we were reliving our childhood as we videoed each other’s increasingly kamikaze attempts to launch higher from the platform. Eventually Steve fell flat on his back and we collapsed

yet again into fits of laughter. The giggles continued every time we replayed it and debated who was going to collect the £200 from Jeremy Beadle.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent in anticipation of that command performance of local dancers. We sat like lords on the hotel veranda, sipping beer, skimming through books and magazines and trying in vain to identify the cocktail of colourful birds that flitted from shrub to bush to lawn. From our palace on the hill overlooking the moulded wilds of this corner of Africa, I imagined myself to be a Victorian settler, posted rather begrudgingly to this idyllic backwater, where I had built my little English enclave and was now slowly coming to terms with the rugged beauty of the untamed “out there”.

Luwawa certainly smacked of empire in all its paternal pomp. As I have already stated, Britain’s involvement in this particular slice of Africa is often seen as one of the few examples of colonialism that can be described even through history’s revealing x-ray as being genuinely altruistic. After Livingstone’s accounts of the terrible scenes he had witnessed along the lakeshore were published, efforts were made to stamp out the slave trade in the area and in 1875, the slave market at Zanzibar was closed. In the years that followed, the UMCA (Universities’ Mission to Central Africa) set up a string of missions along the lakeshore which helped to settle the ongoing disputes between the fierce Ngoni and put upon Tonga tribes. The Free Church of Scotland established successful and ongoing missions at Blantyre (which became Malawi’s largest city) and Livingstonia, where, inspired by their patron’s humanitarian values, great efforts were made to treat Africans respectfully and work towards the betterment of the local area.

The missions in Malawi provided the best education in Africa, with localised literacy rates sometimes even reaching 100%. They introduced new crops and agricultural technologies and passed on practical skills like carpentry and metalwork. The Reverend

Scott who ran the Blantyre mission in the late 19th Century said that “Africa for Africans has been our policy from the first”, and indeed many of the graduates from these mission schools played leading roles in the eventual rise of Malawian nationalism.

Of course, alongside the largely philanthropic work of the missions, British economic and political interests also began to bear influence in the region. Two Scottish brothers, John and Frederick Muir formed the African Lakes Company in 1878, not only to provide the missions with necessary materials, but also to establish a pan-African trading force that would succeed in driving the remaining vestiges of slavery from the region. While the Muirs were injecting a capitalist thrust into the area, Britain was embroiled, along with the other great powers of Europe in a “scramble for Africa”; a ludicrously arrogant assumption that this vast continent was readily available to be carved up and served to satisfy Western appetites for wealth and power. Alarmed by Germany’s unexpected claims on Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and parts of Malawi, Uganda, Kenya and Zanzibar, the British were pushed into taking an altogether keener interest in East Africa. Eventually the Germans were persuaded to exchange their stake in African soil for the small but strategically important island of Heligoland in the North Sea.

And so in 1891 Britain found itself with a vast new African territory stretching from Tanganyika in the North to the Zambezi River in the South and it was given the rather unimaginative name of the British Central African Protectorate. While there were undoubtedly a plethora of self-satisfying motives for the establishment of British control in what was to become Malawi, the firm moral beliefs of the Scottish missionaries generally set the tone for 75 years of peaceful and largely benevolent colonial rule. In the words of one of those humanitarians, William Johnson, “they (the British) did not come here necessarily to subjugate but to protect and instruct.” Debates over History’s branding of the British Empire as a force for good or evil will continue ad infinitum, but ultimately, in the

case of East Africa, peaceful colonialism replaced two centuries of catastrophic violence for the people of the region. As Philip Briggs writes in his Bradt Travel Guide; “It is hard to argue with the assertion that British intervention was the best thing that happened to Malawi in the troubled 19th Century.”

I put the Travel Guide down and sat looking out across the reservoir as the sun blazed a trail of purple and orange hues behind the trammel of mountains. My mind wandered back to the deep discussions we’d had with George about Malawi’s current woes, and I couldn’t escape a vein of questioning my reading had exposed. Why had the apparent successes of British colonial rule in Malawi failed to blossom in the latter part of the 20th century? What factors had led to the spiral of poverty and disease we were witnessing on our daily travels? Were African Nationalism and independence to blame? Did Britain continue to owe a moral and financial debt of responsibility to its former territories? Was it shirking those responsibilities like a distant father refusing to pay alimony? In short, what had gone wrong?”

The answers would have to wait as I put the book to one side and was called to dinner. Henry had returned from repairing the burst tyre in Mzimba. He had also spoken to Martha about plans for the final day of the challenge. It seemed that a group of young people from four different projects in the Mzuzu region were to meet us at a roadblock outside the city limits. From there we would walk to the St John’s Orphanage to see where the money raised would be going before taking a football session at a local pitch. Martha had also organised a visit to the SOS Children’s Village nearby which had strong links with the Football Association back in England. It seemed we were in for a full day once the challenge was over. John Fleming was also keen to visit another project in the area. Ekwendeni was a mission that had contacts with several churches in England. A friend of John’s had told him of the mission which he was now keen to see for himself, but Steve was doubtful about whether we would have enough time to visit all of the projects in one day.

As we ate, members of the local village began to arrive and set up their drums in the garden beyond the hotel veranda. Chilly darkness had descended on Luwawa when we filed out onto the patio decking and found chairs to watch the performance. There was a palpable air of excitement as we sat on the veranda. It seemed as though the entire village had turned up, either to perform or to watch. An elderly man rose to present the evening.

“Thank you for allowing us to come and welcome you to our country” he said with faltering English and a smile that flashed in the darkness.

“We would first like to dedicate a song to George Wardlow, who has done so much for our village. We would like to honour him with a dance.”

George looked sheepish as a perfectly pitched wail signalled for two male drummers to begin pummelling rhythmically on their instruments. The song was a call and response chant interspersed with soft melodies and a hypnotic rhythm that pulsed warmly against the coolness of the night. One by one the women of the village got up to join a growing circle of dancers moving anticlockwise around the drummers whose biceps began to shine with sweat as they pounded the drums. One of the dancing women with a commanding voice was directing the singing with the other female dancers responding in unison with perfect pitch and timing. It was a Chitalele; a popular dance, often used as a form of inter-village competition on full-moon nights. The dancing seemed effortless as they hopped from one foot to the other and made symbolic shapes with their arms. In contrast to the near-naked men, most of the women were wearing long chitengas. Some of the older women had shawls around their shoulders, and one or two carried babies on their backs. Swaddled curiously in white cotton backpacks, we could see their tiny heads bobbing nonchalantly against their mother’s necks as they danced. It seemed to add weight to the cliché that African’s are born with rhythm. The dancers were smiling

broadly as they sung in their own language. We obviously couldn't understand precisely what they were singing about but it wasn't hard to get the gist. Several phrases we could recognise;

“Georgie, Georgie!” They sang, “Ndikufuna ziko Georgie!”

“They are thanking George” said Henry leaning over as if we hadn't guessed. We nudged each other and looked over towards George who was as relaxed as ever, his usual benign smile hidden by the grey beard as he tapped his fingers and rocked his chair to the beat of his own homage.

We found it very difficult not to laugh, especially as more and more songs seemed to be devoted to honouring George Wardlow. It was no wonder the Yorkshireman had not returned to teaching in Barnsley. As the evening continued more dances were presented. Two young men performed an impressive display of synchronized stomping and there were more group exultations of Georgie and the Luwawa Forest Lodge.

After the display was over and we thanked the participants, we handed some money to George, carefully making sure we were giving at least the going rate. George assured us our offering was a generous one and doubled the sum, which he then passed on to the village elder who had given the introduction.

Now looking up at the infinite beauty of the universe, with several shooting stars blazing their short trails like distant fireworks across the sky, I said my prayers and secretly wished I could stay gazing at this magnificent setting for ever. But the night chill gnawed at my burnt shoulders, and I remembered my tiredness. We had a challenge to resume in the morning and we had to say goodbye to Luwawa. I sat up and looked at the bright shimmering reflections on the surface of the reservoir and made a silent vow that one day I would return to Luwawa Forest Lodge.

CHAPTER 16 SNAKE!

A wave of nausea swept over me as I crunched into my anti-malarial tablets before breakfast. I was never one for swallowing pills, but the lingering taste of powdered anti-biotic made me want to get practising. No amount of scrambled egg and orange juice seemed to wash away the bitterness galling my stomach.

This self-induced illness had dampened my enthusiasm for a melodramatic farewell to the beautiful Luwawa, a place of such allure I was already planning my return. I glanced over my shoulder at the majestic view, taking a last snapshot before beginning the laborious task of loading the Toyota with our jumble of luggage. Henry was already directing the packing with gusto, but I could tell that the rest of us were entirely more sluggish about the prospect of returning to the dusty roads of the highlands for more gruelling and monotonous physical endurance.

Reluctantly we settled up at the bar and said our goodbyes to George who expressed his well wishes for the continuation of our journey and insisted we sign the hotel guest book. Bumping along the rocky woodland track that led back to the M1, I spotted something furry clinging to a high pine branch. It was, Henry confirmed, a vervet monkey, and as it was, rather surprisingly, the first wild mammal we had seen on our week long trek, we stopped to marvel at the spectacle. The black faced monkey soon realised it was being watched and after failing to

stare us out, swung grumpily out of view. Having successfully spotted one primate, it wasn't long before we could pick out the grey-brown fur and distinctive black faces of others camouflaged against the trees.

It was another chilly morning but by the time we reached a curious car wreck (our starting point for the day) rusting in a vain attempt to blend in with the ruddy earth along the roadside, the sun was beginning to burn through the thin mountain air.

Steve's first leg of the day was a hilly one as the national thoroughfare wound an undulating path through the tree-shrouded mountains. For the second time Steve was stopped by the authorities; this time two traffic officers grilled him about the safety issues surrounding his unusual pastime. Once again Henry stepped in to smooth a potentially rocky encounter with some fast talking translation and an emblematic laugh. The policemen walked away smiling, shaking their heads in disbelief and cautioning Steve to stick closer to the safety of the roadside.

Although much of the area was thickly wooded – a mixture of pine for harvesting and the native and more aesthetic looking *brachystegia* – the high course of the road still allowed for some breath-taking views across miles of rugged terrain. Up in front stood a series of impossible kopje peaks that we could only hope the road did not attempt to climb. The largest one, Henry informed us, was called Elephant Rock. Even from a distance of 20 miles away it was easy to see why. The west face of the stone structure resembled the bulbous head and steep curling trunk of an elephant in profile.

As we progressed up and down increasingly steep slopes, we noticed that the length of the inclines roughly corresponded to Steve and Pete's 2 mile stretches. Steve had very definitely drawn the short straw. The start of his runs invariably began at the bottom of a large hill and ended at the top, leaving Pete to breeze happily down the other side.

I decided on Steve's third run to step out of the van and give him some moral support. Whether it was the altitude or the steepness of the slope that prevented me from completing my only run of the day, I wasn't quite sure, but as I clambered back in to the van trying in vain to catch my breath, I felt ashamed at my own poor level of fitness, and in awe of Steve's.

On past the small town of Chikangawa he ran through an apparently more affluent area. The usual wood and earth rondavels and simple brick buildings were replaced with large whitewashed silos, stern looking factory buildings and even the occasional residential estate complete with gardens and driveway. Chikangawa was the home of the Raiply Plant, an engineering firm that processed the timber felled from the Viphya Forest. The company was one of the largest employers in Malawi, encouraging young men from across the country to work in its saw mills, producing hardboard and plywood for export.

We soon came across a number of workers in hard hats on their lunch break, and one excited chap ventured to the Toyota to shake our hands vigorously and ask us some questions.

"Hello, I'm Louis Chilwa, I saw you on TV Malawi!" he said grinning. I thrust a hand through the window of the ATV to greet him and switched on the camera to film him with the other.

"So what is your main aim?" he enquired with genuine interest, and when I had briefly explained the premise of our challenge, he shook my hand again and flashed an understated smile. "That is nice! Well all the best, have a safe trip!" he waved and returned to his work mates. The quick encounter was typical of the friendly support we continued to receive along the route.

Five miles past the Raiply Plant the road emerged from a thick tunnel of pines to continue its way down a gentle slope between yellowing arable fields. For once it was Steve's turn to benefit from a downhill run. Letting the older brother press on at

his usual metronomic pace, we decided to stop at a collection of huts to buy some sugar cane. The long green sticks resembling bamboo lay in bundles by the roadside to be sold to sweet-toothed travellers like ourselves. We had often seen men, women and children of all ages munching the end of the woody stalks, biting and spitting away the green-brown outer bark to chew the sugary white pulp in the centre, and we were all curious to sample the local craze. At just 5 Kwacha per stick, the sugar cane was an inexpensive treat, and Henry instructed the man in charge of the bundle to pick a long stalk and hack it into 4 foot-long pieces for our consumption.

While we stretched our legs John F ambled over to greet two old timers who were sat on a bench playing Bawo; a board game a bit like drafts but played with seeds and sticks. John attempted to discern the rules of the game but eventually satisfied himself with a short conversation with the two men. He was required to give a suitable explanation as to why his son had recently passed the small roadside gathering dressed in a striking red t-shirt, wraparound shades and kicking a football out in front of him.

Steve was by now 800 metres away, ploughing on mechanically as the road entered another shaded cocoon of trees and headed uphill once again. Focussing relentlessly on the bobbing football in front of him was hypnotic and as if in a trance, Steve barely noticed anything beyond his peripheral vision. Until that is, mid-pace, he saw something long and dark loom beneath him. The shape lay in his path like a thick black coil of rope and Steve had to suddenly readjust his step to avoid treading on it. (By coincidence back in England, the only hazards Steve had encountered whilst pounding the pavements were also long, dark and coiled, and usually made a mess of his trainers. But this African turd was different; it moved.)

Steve jumped back in surprise and turned to look at what he had narrowly avoided. The ball rolled scared across the road and

Steve uttered an embarrassing “Arrgh” as if he had just run through a giant spider’s web. His legs buckled as he found himself face to face with a large slate coloured snake.

Minutes later we approached a rather stunned looking runner standing at the roadside with one hand on his hip, the other pointing into the long grass along the verge. I turned my camera in the direction of Steve’s finger and found a slick grey reptile slithering into the undergrowth. Henry also caught a glimpse of it before it disappeared and studiously identified it as a member of the cobra family because of its flat head;

“Probably a black mamba” he said soberly, “one of the most poisonous snakes in the world.”

For Pete and I, the seriousness of this situation gradually began to dawn and as ever we reacted in accordance with our maturity. We split our sides laughing.

“It’s not funny” whined Steve, a smirk beginning to form as he regained his nerve and battled against our infectious fit of giggles. “I could have been killed!”

That much was true. The black mamba had been sunning itself on the tarmac when Steve had hopped over it, and while we humans tend to fall asleep on the beach at least once every summer, snakes always remain alert when they do their sunbathing. Mambas are acutely sensitive to any vibrations in their surrounding environment, and the thud of Steve’s trainers would have signalled either an approaching meal or an encroaching threat to the limbless predator. The fact that the black mamba is also the fastest snake in the world with a striking range of up to 3 metres, and is considered by experts to be the most aggressive of its species, makes Steve’s escape seem all the more fortuitous.

Luckily the snake was probably too surprised by the sight of a curiously attired white man kicking a football along the highway to attack, and instead opted to make for cover. Had it been less

magnanimous and decided to strike, it could have delivered a venomous bite powerful enough to have killed 20 men. Steve would have had just 2 hours to get to a hospital and anti-venom before succumbing to the deadly neurotoxins. With the nearest hospital roughly 2 hours drive away, Steve's life would very definitely have been in the balance had the mamba been in a slightly more irritable mood. On the other hand, given Steve's poor eyesight, it is fair to say that the snake also had a lucky escape that afternoon, being mere inches away from getting crushed by a size 9 Diadora.

Resting in the front of the Toyota Steve regained his composure and was able to elucidate on his near death experience; "That's certainly the last time I take a slash in the thick undergrowth" he said with a shiver.

With the drama hopefully over for the day, the two runners pressed on a little more urgently towards the finishing line, keeping an understandable distance from the grassy scrub that lined the roadside. Elephant Rock loomed into prominence. Rising 2,000 metres above sea level, it became our most beautiful and obvious finishing point to date. The huge grey hunk of rock with its graceful curves and impossibly steep sides seemed out of place against a backdrop of grassy hills and pockets of forest, as if some giant had found it on a beach and after rolling it over in his huge hands a few times, had placed it by the roadside for safe keeping.

We checked our watches and John McCarthy announced to the camera like an Olympic official that a new record had been set. 4 hours and 45 minutes for a marathon between them was an impressive enough feat for the Fleming boys to be proud of. The fact they had done it across some pretty hilly terrain in altitude, having run six marathons between them in the preceding week was nothing short of astounding. Perhaps the rest day had recharged the boys' batteries; perhaps they were beginning to get

the hang of the conditions and the peculiarities of running with a football on bumpy tarmac. I had my own theory however, and it involved a fear of snakes lurking in the undergrowth.

Kasito Lodge was one of many government owned properties in the Viphyra hills. Built to accommodate travelling officials and dignitaries journeying from their homes in the North through to the more commercial cities in the South, it also served as a temporary home to the hundreds of migrant workers on the plantations. In recent years such shelters had begun to be rented out to tourists and travellers such as ourselves. In order to reach our forest abode for the next two nights we had to double back on ourselves as Kasito was only 15 miles further north than Luwawa. It seemed a little demoralising to be heading back into the dark environs of the rather ominous pine forest. Steve was pleased to note a sign by the roadside announcing that the Lodge had its own restaurant, but when we arrived at the spacious brick building we found it empty and more like a holiday bungalow than a fully functioning hotel. The “restaurant” as it turned out was a small if adequately furnished kitchen and adjoining dining hall. It looked likely that this would be more of a do-it-yourself stay than any of our previous destinations.

Despite the rather disingenuous promise of a “restaurant”, Kasito was spacious and comfortable enough with three large dormitories rather sparsely furnished with barrack-room beds and little else. The living area was more comfortable with a log fire and ready stash of chopped wood to keep the men of the expedition occupied, and a selection of rather comfortable sofas to relax in. About the walls were large photographic portraits of Malawi’s political establishment; Hastings Banda, Bakili Maluzi and the current president, looking militarily austere as they gazed down haughtily from positions on all four walls.

As Linda organised another expansive lunch in the kitchen, I took a little wander outside. Around the back of the lodge several

picnic benches were arranged on the lawn overlooking a pretty view of wooded escarpments and green valleys. The scene was very close to that of a typical English country estate. We could have been in Somerset had there not been a gaggle of vervet monkeys playing mischievously in the branches of a nearby tree. We spent what seemed like hours mesmerised by their cheeky humanlike displays as they comically patted each other and played beebo with us inquisitively from the safety of the branches.

Adjacent to the lodge were several basic looking huts where the workers at Kasito lived, but there didn't seem to be anyone at home apart from several children who ran around the dirt yard chasing chickens and squealing delightedly at the tree bound primates.

Later in the day after snoozing away the afternoon, we began to realise that with an absence of staff at the lodge; we were not going to get any dinner that night. None of us fancied a protracted drive into the nearest town (Mzimba – an hour's journey) for an equally long wait at a restaurant, but there seemed to be little alternative. Curiously in the dining area we found several laminated menus and after a few phone calls Henry discovered that someone from the neighbouring huts would be around later in the evening to cook our choices. We all decided to go for chicken with nsima – the staple food of Malawi. Often called mealy-maize in other parts of Africa, it is a starchy porridge made from corn flour. With a taste and consistency like semolina, it didn't set my culinary world alight, but it was certainly filling.

After dinner while Steve tinkered with the log fire, I nosed around the lodge and made the pleasant discovery of a huge stash of bottled beer in the dirty old refrigerator that hummed suspiciously in the dining hall. Unfortunately, access to the sweet nectar was guarded by a lethal belt of electricity that went straight to my funny bone every time I tried to open the door. Pete and I

spent several minutes trying to extricate the beer without getting shocks in a scene that must have resembled something from the Simpsons;

“Mmmm...Beer...Ow!...Mmm...Beer...Doh!”

Finally trying to relax with a bottle of lager in a numb and tingling hand, I looked up once again at the ominous political heavyweights bearing down from the walls and couldn't help but feel nervous. Any minute I was expecting an angry government official to stride through the door and bark at us that it was a capital offence to drink alcohol in the presence of Malawi's founding fathers.

The figure that dominated not just the lounge at Kasito Lodge but the whole of Malawi still, was the nation's first and most enduring president; Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The rise and fall of this formidable man, mirrors that of many African statesmen who found themselves intoxicated with the elixir of power during the turbulent political years of post-colonialism. What started as one man's idealistic struggle for independence and freedom from empire ended all too familiarly with the increasingly despotic rule of a paranoid and aging dictator, fighting to cling to the last addictive fumes of his power.

Like other African regimes, Banda's rule had begun promisingly. Born in 1898 at Kasungu, Banda witnessed during his childhood the division of the Central African Protectorate into Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) and Nyasaland in 1907. From there the fortunes of the future Malawi began to shift again. Lacking the lucrative mineral deposits of the neighbouring Rhodesias, Nyasaland became regarded as something of a colonial backwater, too densely populated to embark on cash-crop farming and lacking the lure of diamonds and gold that would attract European investment.

Of course, in many ways this was a positive thing; unlike many other British colonies where land was divided by white settlers to build huge money making farms, 85% of the land in Nyasaland remained, at least in theory, in the hands of tribal chiefs who were free to continue their traditional subsistence lifestyles. But this lack of development and the absence of a monetary economy led to strains on the rapidly increasing population. The British, struggling to meet the huge administrative costs of its expanding empire but unwilling to reduce its share of world domination, required taxes in return for the privilege of their good governance and this forced many Malawians to leave the land and seek work in the copper and coal mines of Rhodesia and South Africa. Conditions were appalling for these migrant workers scratching out a meagre living to pay taxes for their families back home. Villages were robbed of their able young men for months at a time. Agriculture suffered as did traditional family structures put under strain by these enforced separations. Nyasaland, in an attempt to drag its economy into the 20th Century was in danger of pulling itself apart.

Unsurprisingly, the people began to protest against the colonial system. Many educated products of those Scotch missionary schools began to rise up, bolstered by the popular Ethiopianist movement of the 1930's and the pro-African philosophies of Jamaican visionary Marcus Garvey, to demand "Africa for the Africans." The movement was religious as well as political and was embraced by many in the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church across the continent.

One such convert to Ethiopianism was Hastings Banda who had joined the AME in Johannesburg having left his homeland to work in the coal mines of Natal. According to a popular myth that sheds some light on his somewhat duplicitous character and ruthless determination, Banda fled his mission school near Kasungu after being accused of cheating in an examination and walked a full 800km across Mozambique to reach South Africa. But before Banda asserted himself politically, he first wanted to

prove himself academically, perhaps in defiance of his accusers back home. In 1925 the AME sent Banda to the USA to further his education where the idealistic young African thrived, spending the next 12 years in full time education. He studied at the Universities of Indiana and Chicago before moving South where he was awarded a Doctorate of Medicine from the Meharry Medical Institute, Tennessee in 1937.

Banda's dream was to return to his native Nyasaland to become a doctor, but in order to do so he needed a license to practise medicine in the British Empire. Next stop Britain for the ambitious if ageing student but despite gaining his license after 3 years further study in Edinburgh, Banda's applications to practise in his homeland were repeatedly snubbed. He later claimed that this was due in part to the reluctance of white ex-pat nurses to work under a black doctor. When he was finally offered a hospital job in Zomba, it was on the provision that he did not mix socially with the white doctors there.

Rejecting such stark racial prejudice, Banda decided to set up his own practice first in Liverpool and then in London, where he moved in 1945. In the capital he found success and acceptance among his peers and patients alike, who, 3 years before HMS Windrush arrived ushering in the first wave of immigration from the Empire, must have considered his colour and position as something of a novelty. It's quite a paradox to think that Banda was rejected by his native country on the basis of his skin, where the vast majority of people were not only black, but desperately in need of his services, while the exclusively white society of its colonial administrators were only too willing to embrace him. It speaks volumes for the particular nature of the racial prejudice that flourished in Southern Africa in the latter half of the 20th Century, where minority white governments, fuelled by paranoia and increasing despotism, used racism as a tool in their brutal yet vain attempts to hold on to the vestiges of colonial power.

From his prominent position as a successful London doctor, Banda made generous donations to the NAC (Nyasaland African Congress), and financed the education of at least 40 Africans over a period of 7 years. His home in Harlesden also became a meeting place for African nationalist leaders based in London. Here he enjoyed the company of Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta – the future leaders of independent Ghana and Kenya respectively. But Banda's high profile respectability in London was not to last. In 1953 he was named in divorce proceedings between an army officer, Major French and his wife Margaret. Humiliated and discredited by the scandal, Banda took off to the Gold Coast with Mrs French in tow, having been invited by his old friend and newly installed Prime Minister of that country, Kwame Nkrumah.

In the same year, the seeds of unrest that would lead to eventual independence were being sown in Nyasaland. For some time the white and considerably racist government of Southern Rhodesia, fearing the rising tide of African Nationalism had called on the British government to federate Nyasaland with the two Rhodesias. Fearing that they would be reduced to mere satellites of the more wealthy country to the south, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland bitterly complained. But despite protests from the NAC and a vow from the still influential Banda that he would never set foot in his homeland should such a political amalgam occur, the British government agreed to the Federation which came into effect in 1953.

During the testing times of the Federation, the NAC came under the influence of a group of young radical leaders who increasingly called for the people of Nyasaland to rise in protest and demand independence. Among them was Henry Chipembere who eventually managed to persuade his hero in exile to make a return to his native land after 42 years of absence. Chipembere anticipated that Banda would be little more than a figurehead for the movement, but when he returned in 1957, the former doctor

very quickly seized the opportunity to install himself as leader of the of the NAC.

Banda urged the 60,000 members of the NAC to non-violent protest, but inevitably the mass gatherings that followed often ended with bloody riots and the liberal use of tear gas and police bullets. In 1959 alone 48 Africans lost their lives. The government declared a state of emergency, the NAC was banned and Banda was promptly thrown into jail.

Wisely, the British government realised that change was inevitable and a year later Nyasaland was awarded greater autonomy within the Federation and Banda was freed. With the NAC banned, a prominent party member, Orton Chirwa immediately founded the MCP (Malawi Congress Party), only to be unceremoniously ushered aside by the increasingly bullying Banda upon his release from prison. In late 1961 Britain awarded a selective vote to Africans and in elections of that year the MCP won 94% of the national share and all but 6 of the 28 seats in parliament. Banda became Minister for Natural Resources in an administration led by the colonial governor Glyn Jones, but before long Britain had agreed to a two-phase plan for self government in Nyasaland. In December 1962 the House of Commons declared that Nyasaland could withdraw from the Federation, 2 months later Banda was sworn in as Prime Minister and on July 6th 1964, Nyasaland was granted full independence and renamed Malawi. A new country was born and at the venerable age of 66, Dr Hastings Banda was only just beginning a 29 year journey that would see him spiral from Respected Bringer of Democracy to Benign Dictator to eventual Delusional Despot.

I looked up at the frail ageing figure on the wall at Kasito Lodge, bolstered as it was by the starched military uniform and ceremonial pomp of his surroundings, and mused upon the corrupting nature of power and time.

CHAPTER 17 **BANDA BROTHERS**

I'm relaxing in the back of the Toyota, scribbling down a few notes into my journal and swigging on a warm bottle of slightly tangy water. Steve, a few paces ahead of the crawling van is toiling over a few more miles in the sunshine, the dusty football seemingly glued to his feet. Pete dabs some sun lotion onto his glowing cheeks then bends forward to twiddle the radio dial. Eventually after several seconds of scratchy intermission, the dial alights on a clear channel and a sudden burst of acoustic guitar fills the Landcruiser.

The unmistakable harmonies of Simon and Garfunkel spill out and dissipate into the vast stagnant air that hangs above the Viphya Plateau. The song is "Cecelia" and the familiar chorus erupts with joyous abandon;

"Cecelia, you're breaking my heart, you're shaking my confidence daily..."

Suddenly the harmony is punctured by the screech of a police siren. Before we know what is going on we are pulled from our vehicle by huge uniformed officers and bundled onto the verge. The armed guards form a mountainous and stern-faced cordon, their huge hands resting on shiny black Kalashnikov rifles. Before we can raise a whimpering complaint about our treatment, a small old man, looking like a retired army general bursts through the human barrier. He is flailing his arms and screaming blue murder as he walks threateningly towards us.

Through my wide fearful eyes I recognise him as the ageing dictator on the wall at Kasito. It's Hastings Banda, and he's looming right over me shouting a string of curses and threats!

"Why are you playing that song?!" He demands, "What are you doing?" Do you not know that song is banned in my country?! And in any case," he adds almost as an aside, "it is a capital offence to play football on the public highway."

He resumes his tirade of verbal abuse and I can feel the heat and spit emanating from his sweaty face as it closes in on mine. "I will shoot you" he screams "I WILL SHOOT YOU!!!"

"LIMA! LIMA!" he bellows and suddenly the fear turns to incredulity. How does he know my nickname?

Like a sick practical joke reality dawned with my morning and I opened my eyes to find Steve, not Hastings Banda looming over me.

"Lima, wake up, it's 6 O'clock!" Another early morning wake up call.

As I rose sleepily and made my way into the dining hall where the local workers had organised breakfast, I smiled with the realisation that my rather bizarre dream actually had some basis in fact. I'd read the night before that Hastings Banda had indeed banned the song "Cecelia" by Simon and Garfunkel because the release of the song had corresponded with a rocky patch in his relationship with his mistress Cecelia Kadzamira. Apparently, the lyrics were more than he could bear.

Throughout the 1960's and 70's censorship was rife in Malawi. Books and films and even codes of dress were banned, often for absurd reasons and at the whim of the increasingly paranoid leader. For example, it wasn't until 1993 that women (including tourists) were allowed to wear trousers in the country.

Sadly, Banda's growing autocracy had more than just trivial effects. Soon after independence he announced that Malawi had "one party, one leader, one government and no nonsense about it". One by one the founding members of the MCP were dismissed from the cabinet to be replaced almost overnight by a bunch of yes-men. The consequence of these developments came close to civil war. Banda's one time devotee, Henry Chipembere led a rebellion which was fearfully put down by the army in 1965. Chipembere managed to escape to Mozambique where his guerrilla followers continued to cause trouble for the Banda regime for several more years, but by 1970, all of the rebels had been rounded up and Banda declared himself to be the Life President of a one party state.

Banda was often described as a benign dictator. This was largely because he was co-operative with the West; an arch conservative, and an unashamed anglophile. Also, surprisingly little news of his human rights abuses reached the outside world during his time in power, so that in 1989, Malawi was actually visited by Margaret Thatcher and the Pope who both praised his achievements. Certainly, Banda was not a dictator in the mould of Stalin or Idi Amin, but there are enough stories of suspicious murders and cases of brutal torture during his reign to send a chill down the spine. There is no doubt that Banda was ruthless enough in his quest for absolute power to have detained an estimated 250,000 Malawians without trial, many of whom, as Banda himself rather sickeningly liked to boast, became "meat for the crocodiles" in the Shire River.

So Malawi had had its fair share of recent political turmoil, as if the ravages of poverty and disease were not enough, and realising this made me appreciate and respect even more the incredible resistance and tenacity of its people. Malawians did not seem to be downtrodden, cowed or broken by an oppressive regime, peering bleakly into a new dawn of democracy. These were joyous, vibrant people, always willing to share their time and smiles, and even the few material possessions they had with

friends and strangers alike. On this, the ninth and penultimate day of our incredible journey, we were to realise the astounding extent of this generosity.

On the way to Elephant Rock, the strange pachydermorphic kopje acting as our starting point for the day, I recounted my amusing dream in an effort to lighten Steve's mood. In fact, everyone seemed a little tetchy as we shivered in the cool grey of morning, pulling on extra jumpers to combat the chilly mountain climate of the highlands. Pete had developed a cold and was drugged up to the eyeballs, while his brother was in a definite funk as he contemplated the busy and complicated schedule of our final day.

The main point of contention was held between father and son. Back in England, John Fleming had been given a contact by a church friend and told to look out for the Ekwendeni project near Mzuzu. Ekwendeni was a mission set up by the CCAP (Church of the Central African Presbyterian) and run by the Reverend Evans Jere, who desperately needed more volunteers to help develop the youth wing of his mission. John had managed to contact the reverend by mobile phone and in a faltering conversation had arranged a visit on our final day. Steve, who saw it as another distraction from completing the challenge, was adamant that we would not have time to visit the mission and sulked in the back of the van as we sped to our starting point.

Eventually Steve relented, conceding that there could be time to visit Ekwendeni, or "the rogue project" as he had grudgingly dubbed it, early in the morning of the last day. The problem was fitting it in around our triumphant entry into the city - a planned sprint to the finish at the Mzuzu roadblock. We would have to run the gauntlet of actually crossing our supposed finishing line before our designated arrival time as Ekwendeni was a couple of miles beyond Mzuzu. If anyone caught sight of the brothers

crossing the finish line in the Toyota, our credibility could be called into question.

Approaching the steep kopje we resolved to think about the dilemma later and to commit to our last full day of running with determination. Looking at the map, we reckoned that we were just 25 miles away from the outskirts of Mzuzu. Effectively, we could finish our challenge a day early.

As Pete got ready for the first session of the day, I turned my camera towards Linda to assess the mood. Looking tired and shy at the camera her words summed up the pessimistic atmosphere; “Nearly over” she said before disappearing into the van.

The days running progressed steadily through some spectacular countryside. There were more steep hills for Steve to climb and more relaxing slopes for Pete to speed down, as the vast beauty of the plains that stretched beyond the road to the west caught our eyes. We were now getting very low on supplies of sweets that we loved to hand out to the scores of children we passed. It was getting to the stage where we were actually attempting to out pace the trailing kids because we were embarrassed at not having anything to give them. Finally and with some sense of ceremony, John Fleming organised a neat line of children who had gathered around the van and formally delivered the last of our sweets. When all the children had received a gift we saw more running towards us. “Quick, lets go, we don’t have anything left!” said Steve in a panic.

It was Sunday, and again we passed people dressed more colourfully than usual, making their way to various places of worship. One shoeless man in a shabby cream suit threw reverent caution to the wind and ran with Steve, passing the ball along the road with unbridled joy until mopping his brow and waving enthusiastically; he went his own way along one of the many small paths that led from the roadside to a little whitewashed church.

By 12 the constant running was beginning to take its toll on an already under-the-weather Pete, but it wasn't his legs that were getting sore. He was starting to suffer from that most embarrassing of running conditions; nipple chafing. Sheepishly Pete rubbed some analgesic cream on his chest and plastered up his nipples to prevent further rubbing, all the time playing down Linda's sisterly concern.

While Pete was being patched up, I was out running with his brother. Ashamed of my previous lacklustre performances on the road, I was determined to achieve my six miles for the day and joined Steve on yet another hilly incline. I managed to complete the two mile jog, but found myself once again heaving the oxygen into my lungs for what seemed like hours in order to recover. Puffing uncontrollably as Pete pointed the camera in my face; "Davo, you look pretty tired!"

"That's just about the hardest run I've done" I panted, "I don't know whether it was the altitude or..." I paused to catch my breath and Steve filled the silence;

"I think it was the pace!" he smiled cheekily.

The cold thin mountain air warmed quickly with only the wisps of high cloud to shield it from the rising sun. We passed more groups of men sat bored at the roadside, waiting to sell bundles of firewood gathered from the edge of the plantation. The villages we were passing now were hidden in part behind clumps of trees and I strained to see the familiar sights of women gathering water while their offspring, often as young as 4 or 5 cared for still younger siblings who could not yet walk.

Soon the boys ran through the last of the wooded enclaves and began the long descent into Mzuzu. The road passed along a high ridge that overlooked the westward expanse of land towards the border with Zambia. The terrain was breathtakingly beautiful as the hills descended gradually toward open grassland plains. Perhaps 200 yards below the roadside, perched rather precariously on the top of a craggy hill, a small, circular village

stood out like an image from a picture postcard. The scene was incredible and seemed strangely familiar. Instinctively Steve pulled out the fold-away map of Malawi he had brought with him and held it up for us all to see. Remarkably, the cover photograph was of the same picturesque village we were now passing.

It was a unanimous decision to pay the village a proper visit and we called for Pete to stop running. On the penultimate day of the challenge, here was the perfect opportunity for us to finally get more of an insight into village life in Malawi. As our reserves of sweets had run out, we decided we would present the village with one of the footballs we had used for the challenge. Pumping up the flat ball so that it didn't look like an altogether useless gift, Steve and Pete were joined by their father to begin the steep descent from the roadside to the village below. I followed excitedly with the camera, sniffing a scoop for the documentary and wondering what on earth these poor people were going to make of our gift, as nestled on top of a jutting hill, the village seemed miles away from any flat surface on which ball games could be played.

As we approached the enclosed circle of huts we could see smoke emanating from several open fires and the high-spirited squeals of children at play. We were filled with a rush of adrenaline and then panic. How were we going to communicate with these rural people? Was it considered good form to wander into a village unannounced? Our fears were allayed as we looked behind to see a puffing Henry running down the slope towards us, wearing his red Kick 4 Malawi t-shirt and ever present smile. He scuffed past a bedraggled chicken that was wandering freely in front of the path and it flapped in alarm.

"I thought you might need some help with translation" he said, uncannily echoing our thoughts.

As we entered the small circle of huts, we were struck by its poverty. The children who had been playing barefoot in the dust looked dangerously malnourished, their tatty clothes covered in mud. Some of them ran into their huts at the first sight of the white visitors, while others scuttled behind their mothers skirts and peered out at us inquisitively from the comfort and safety of distance. Some of the women looked worried and backed away, but Henry soon eased their apprehension with some friendly words we could not understand. The village was a collection of small huts with whitewashed mud walls and thatched roofs. At the entrance to the village there was one red brick dwelling, presumably the home of the village chief, which had a corrugated iron roof and glass windows, but it was the only brick building on the site and looked incongruous amid the obvious poverty of its surroundings.

Steve strode up to the first man he saw and offered his hand. The man, dressed in a tatty grey suit minus shoes offered us a friendly handshake as Henry began telling him our story. As Henry was speaking, an older man looking strangely dignified in a jumble sale assortment of clothes – tweed trousers, green Nike t-shirt and white suit jacket, joined the younger man in shaking our hands. We took him to be the village elder and he introduced himself as Maxwell Kawunda. The two men greeted us and listened intently as Henry explained who we were and where we came from. The younger man laughed and placed his hands on his head in disbelief as Henry explained the nature of our challenge and that we had been handing out gifts of sweets and pens to the roadside villages. Steve then stepped forward with the football and addressed the elder man.

“It is not much, but we would like to present this football to your village for your children to play with. For you” he said as he handed the deflated ball to the slightly embarrassed but none-the-less delighted village chief. Seeming overjoyed he tucked the ball under his arm, pressed his hands together in a gesture of thanks and uttered the only English he seemed to know;

“Thank you very much!”

Immediately Mr Kawunda handed the ball to the congregation of children that had been adventurous enough to approach. Turning to Henry he muttered that he wanted to return our gesture with a gift of his own and disappeared behind one of the huts. The group of children gathered around the ball, eying it with equal degrees of suspicion and wonder, while the younger man, hands on head once again asked Henry more questions about our trip and explained the less dramatic but vastly more important story of his village. Apparently, Henry translated, many passing tourists stopped to take pictures of the pretty settlement from the roadside, but until now, no-one had ever bothered to walk down the hill to greet the villagers. This obviously had meant a lot to him.

As I panned the camera around the collection of dwellings I suddenly became aware of a shrill squawking from behind the line of huts and before long Mr Kawunda appeared again carrying a scrawny looking bird similar to the one that Henry had nearly run down outside the village. Amazed, we looked at each other and started to laugh. “They’re giving us a chicken!” exclaimed Pete to the camera in disbelief, while his brother, equally taken aback, quickly resigned responsibility for handling the creature.

“You take it!” He said to Pete, designating him the surprise role of animal handler.

As our shock subsided we began to realise the significance of the gift given the obvious poverty of our surroundings. We had presented them with a scuffed-up flat football, practically useless given their precarious location, and in return they were prepared to give us, without hesitation or reluctance, something as clearly valuable as a chicken; a precious provider of eggs and meat for their whole community.

Shaken by this realisation Pete turned to Henry and asked tentatively; “Shall we take it?”

“Yes, we’ll take it” Henry reassured, knowing that etiquette dictated we must accept the gift with good grace. Pete took the still squawking chicken from Mr Kawunda and held it at arms length like a baby with a dirty nappy. Steve, not knowing how to express his thanks, decided to place his hands together and conduct a ridiculously overdramatic bow which made him look like a Chinese courtier prostrating himself before his emperor.

With the comic absurdity of the scene forever lodged in our memories we decided it was time to leave. Waving goodbye to the rather subdued villagers we turned and made our way out of the ring of huts. Maxwell Kawunda was keen to greet the rest of the team and decided to accompany us while two of the children from the village busied themselves around Pete, tying the chicken’s legs with string. The bird was still voicing its concerns noisily as we made our way back to the van and Pete couldn’t help but giggle.

“What the heck are we going to do with this thing?!” he asked shaking his head.

“I’d say we’re probably going to end up eating it for our tea tonight my friend.” I remarked before finally blurting out the puerile schoolboy comment I had been desperately trying to hold back;

“By the way Pete, is this the first time you’ve ever handled another man’s cock?”

Back at the van Henry took over the chicken situation like an old pro, tying the bird into a plastic bag which seemed to quieten its outbursts to a series of soft clucks. Meanwhile John F had rummaged in the boot and produced a selection of pens and notebooks which we felt would even up our debt to the village somewhat. Mr Kawunda once again appeared overwhelmed by our generosity. Taking the gifts he bowed and almost seemed to weep with joy, although I began to wonder whether his tears

were more of despair at the thought of being obliged to give another one of his chickens to well meaning foreigners.

As we said goodbye to the grateful Maxwell, his wife appeared from nowhere. Bent double with either age or deference she seemed to do a slow little dance of thanks around the Toyota which turned a hitherto comic situation to one of serious reflection. These were obviously poor people whom we had managed to touch on some level. Out of their poverty and need they had welcomed us and had given all they could offer. We, in our naivety and extravagant wealth, had only given what we had left spare. Not for the first or last time on our life-changing journey, we had been humbled.

The atmosphere in the van as we pulled away from the small collection of villagers who had climbed the hill to see us off was electric. I turned my camera to Srini who was beaming from ear to ear.

“Srini, does this sort of thing happen in India?” I asked

“Maybe” he replied, “but I have never heard of it. It’s unbelievable!”

“Steve, how are you feeling?” I asked

“Well it’s quite incredible” he answered, “There’s a chicken in the back of the van and there wasn’t 10 minutes ago.” he said with typical understatement.

The excitement of the morning’s events had spurred me to join Pete for the remainder of his run. Exhilarated by the encounter and the knowledge that his new feathered friend was quietly trussed up in the back of the Toyota, Pete seemed to have more bounce in his step as he loped on in front of me, skilfully ushering the ball along the bumpy tarmac. I was enjoying my second run of the day and soon our rhythmic pace had a familiar musical accompaniment. At the next roadside settlement a man was whittling some wood outside his hut and listening to an old

transistor radio. The song blasting out into the sunshine was Booty Man by Craig David. This sudden reminder of home was enough to make us stop and reflect. The moment was even more poignant for Pete because the singer Craig David, a native of Southampton, was also an old school friend. Pete thought about explaining this incredible coincidence to the man sat on his doorstep, but realised that such a conversation would be futile. How could he possibly explain that the melodic voice emanating from a dusty radio in the rural highlands of Northern Malawi was that of an old friend?

Instead we stopped to appreciate the music and soon we were being joined by a group of children to play keepy-up. Pete wowed the youngsters by landing the ball on his neck and shared some other tricks and nifty footwork. The kids, as we had discovered elsewhere in Malawi, were all adept at playing football with their hardened bare feet and showed us some equally impressive moves. One of the children didn't seem to be hindered by the fact that he had a small toddler, probably his brother strapped to his back. The baby's neck looked to be bent awkwardly as if it was broken or deformed. The van pulled up against the curb and disturbed by the state of the small child, Linda asked Henry to find out what was wrong. After a conversation with the boy's mother who was sat nearby, Henry settled his thoughts.

"There are many children like this in Malawi" he said apologetically. "There is a hospital in Mzuzu, but many people in the rural areas are suspicious of new medicines. They are scared that the children will be taken away. Many people here would rather trust the old ways of doing things; witchdoctors and the like." Henry's assessment was a disheartening reminder that superstition and misinformation was still rife among the largely illiterate communities in rural Malawi. The child with the disfigurement would almost certainly die, and there was really nothing we could do to help it. Offering only handshakes and smiles to the enthusiastic children of this impoverished hamlet,

we moved on, continuing our long descent from the highlands to the flat plateau that surrounds Mzuzu.

The downhill stretch was easy on the legs and before long the dribbling relay passed a large reservoir that we could see from our map was located only a few miles outside the city limits. Knowing that we were being followed by the media, and not wanting to spoil the triumphant finish planned for tomorrow, we were cautious that we should stop running and head back to Kasito in the knowledge that we had effectively covered the distance from Lilongwe to Mzuzu in just 8 days. Stopping at the base of a hill, I was sent to run ahead and see if the roadblock into the city was over the brow. From the top of the slope, lungs bursting once again, I could see the unmistakable signs of police activity and a wooden barrier stretched across the road about 400metres up ahead. The barrier marked the end of the challenge, and in typical Fleming fashion, we were early.

During the long drive back to Kasito Lodge I reflected on the day's events and my mind reverted back to politics and history. Henry's mention of the witchdoctor reminded me of the symbolism that Hastings Banda often used to demonstrate his divine right to rule. Though he was an educated man and a fully qualified doctor of medicine, Banda carried with him at all times a fly-whisk – the traditional symbol of the *sangoma* or witchdoctor. He also began to use his middle name – Kamuzu, meaning “little root” to emphasise his connection with the source of Malawi's traditional medicines. With this symbolism, Banda sought to create a cult of personality, setting himself up in the eyes of tribal chiefs as the new Kalonga (holy man) of a Maravian Empire, endowed with a blessing from the gods to bring healing and unity to an impoverished nation. This in part explains why, despite its abuses of power, Banda's government was popular and allowed to continue for nearly three decades.

Even now, many older people in Malawi remember the aged dictator with fondness and respect.

While Malawi was peaceful and achieved relative economic growth during Banda's long reign, it could be said that any other government would have probably achieved the same results over time. Banda was finally forced to relinquish control at the venerable age of 95. In the previous year Britain had stopped all non-humanitarian aid to the country after finally realising the scale of Banda's abuses of power. Early in 1992 the Catholic bishops drafted a *Lenten Letter* documenting the torture and misconduct of the Banda era, which they faxed to the BBC. Banda's response to the letter was to put the bishops under house arrest, an act which in turn provoked violent riots in Lilongwe. In May 1992 over 40 people were shot by the security police. Finally in October of that year, the founder of the MCP, Orton Chirwa, who had been in prison since 1982, was found dead in mysterious circumstances. Banda was running out of friends and resorting to desperate measures as the net closed in around him, but he finally relented, announcing a referendum on multi-party elections the following year. The outcome was predictable and in March 1994 Malawi held its first democratic elections for 30 years.

The victors in that election were the UDF (The United Democratic Front) and its leader, Bakili Maluzi, a Muslim businessman who had served in Banda's cabinet before resigning, became Malawi's first democratically elected President. But democracy didn't necessarily usher in a period of beneficial change for Malawi. The country remained one of the poorest in Africa and crime and government corruption continued. When Maluzi tried to change the constitution to allow him to run for a third term in office in 2002, it looked as though the old abuses witnessed under Banda were about to be re-visited. Thankfully there was enough of an outcry to force him to relent and a politician with a name that surely belongs to a children's

television program, Bingu wa Mutharika became Malawi's next president.

Back at Kasito Lodge we decided to give the chicken to the family that lived next door and cooked our meals. While Henry retrieved the bedraggled animal from the boot of the Toyota, Linda joined Pete and I in forming a presentation party and knocked on the door of the small hut. A child saw us coming and went to retrieve its mother. Henry ambled over with the subdued bird and Pete and I resumed our crude banter;

“Henry’s going to present his cock to the woman next door!” we giggled childishly.

“Will you two quit it!” commanded Linda firmly. She was not amused and had come to check that the children of the family were healthy or in need of medical help. Admonished we stifled our tittering and waited for a small and rather bemused looking woman to appear at the door. Henry told her briefly that we would like to give her a gift in return for their hard work on our behalf and she looked very pleased to accept the chicken.

“What is her name?” Linda enquired.

Henry asked the question in Chitumbuka and after the response, echoed;

“Mrs Banda”.

My eyes lit up as the others rolled theirs and turned away

CHAPTER 18 THE LONGEST DAY

Evans Jere cut a genial figure as he leaned earnestly over his untidy desk. His thick accent, engaging yet tricky to follow, enticed our ears forward as we clung to each word for delayed deciphering. The Reverend had greeted us warmly and invited us into his dusty and unkempt office. His small, wiry frame, dressed in casual blue jeans and a cotton shirt remained hidden behind a mountain of paperwork as he began telling us about Malawi's current AIDS crisis, and the myths and misinformation that hamper progress.

He told us that in the rural areas it is still a common belief among the population that sleeping with a virgin is a cure for HIV. Other common misconceptions are that circumcision prevents the disease, or that showering after sex reduces the chances of contraction. (In 2005 Jacob Zuma, now the President of South Africa, drew widespread condemnation from AIDS activists when he revealed that he had unprotected intercourse with the plaintiff in his rape trial, whom he knew to be HIV-positive, and that he had showered after sex, believing that this would reduce his chances of contracting AIDS.)

Evans also shed light on how tribal traditions across South East Africa have enabled HIV to spread so uncontrollably. "Polygamy is still a great problem here. There are important men in villages with 5 or 6 wives." He said sadly. "There is also a

custom in some areas that states that if a woman's husband dies, she must sleep with another married man before the funeral."

"Finally", said Evans, "there is a belief in many African cultures that a woman only looks beautiful when she has had sex with someone. All these beliefs are in direct conflict with our message of monogamy and abstinence."

We nodded our appreciation as the Reverend went on to tell us about the history of Ekwendeni and the valuable work of the mission. Founded in 1889 by Dr William Elmslie, a Scottish missionary from Aberdeen, the whole complex is now run by the CCAP – the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. The site contains a large general hospital with 183 beds, serving a catchment area of 45,000 with a wider referral of 120,000. The hospital employs 170 staff and sees over 21,000 out-patients every year.

Evans had arrived at Ekwendeni in 1995 and soon established a school for victims of AIDS on the site. He told us that there were around 6000 AIDS orphans in Ekwendeni alone, the area having one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in Malawi. This is mainly because it is a popular stopping point for truck drivers travelling between Malawi and its northern neighbours, Tanzania, Kenya and beyond. The transient lifestyle of tens of thousands of Africa's long-haul truckers has often been sited as one of the primary causes of the spread of AIDS across the continent.

He went on to list some more startling facts. Across Malawi it is estimated that in the next five years, 50% of the population between the ages of 15 and 35 years will have died from HIV & AIDS and that by 2010 over 2 million will have died. The indications are that a million people have already perished. The population of Malawi is just over 12.6 million. The life expectancy for both men and women is just 40 years.

These were depressing statistics and I felt pretty ashamed that all we could offer Evans and his project were a couple of

footballs and a new kit. What he really needed, and he felt no embarrassment in telling us, was an army of volunteers to come and spend time at the project. John assured him that he would promote the work of Ekwendeni among the young people at his church and encourage them to organise a trip.

Outside the dark office, the sun was beginning to blaze and as our eyes adjusted to the light, Evans introduced us to his deputy, Patrick Khonje. Patrick was a larger than life character; an older man with a dramatic tone to his voice and rounded vowels honed by years of listening to the BBC's World Service. He was in charge of the academic learning at the school and proceeded to show us around the clutter of single floor red brick classrooms that were spread liberally across the site.

Entering one stuffy building we were surprised to see a room filled with old IBM computers, on which perhaps 30 young people were working hard. "This is our commercial wing" announced Patrick proudly, "The students learn accounting and business studies using these computers. We aim to hatch Malawians like chickens!" he laughed and slapped me on the back so hard that I coughed.

More practical skills training was provided for the orphans on the other side of the complex where sewing, papermaking and carpentry were taught as well as crisis intervention to help deal with the ravages of poverty and disease in their own villages.

As we walked back across the red dust of the schoolyard we couldn't help but be impressed, not only by the work going on at the school, but by the impressive chapel that dominated the site. It was a huge Victorian church, built in the gothic style by Charles Scott in 1895, and looked entirely incongruous set amidst the dusty brick buildings with their corrugated iron roofs. It was the closest thing we had seen in Malawi to a cathedral. Inside were immaculate pews and impressive stained glass windows that looked out onto a very different world.

A stone's throw away was the under-staffed hospital where the receptionist recognised us from Malawi TV and invited us to meet the matron. This elderly woman looked tired and drawn, but nevertheless managed an appreciative smile as Linda handed over the remnants of our medical supplies for use in the hospital.

Steve had been dragging his heels around Ekwendeni and was itching to return to Mzuzu. He and Pete had ducked down in the van like fugitives as we sped past the roadblock on the way to the mission complex, just in case any journalists happened to spot them. Now, after waving goodbye to Evans and Patrick at the mission, the boys had to repeat the ignominy on the return journey. They needn't have bothered however. Just an hour away from the boy's scheduled finish, the hoards of enthusiastic spectators we had secretly hoped had been accumulating at the roadblock were dishearteningly absent.

Humbled by a renewed sense of our own unimportance, we ate a makeshift lunch at the reservoir outside the city limits and planned our big finish. I was to head to the roadblock with the camera to meet our gathering supporters (if there were to be any) and film the boys' final newsworthy strides into Mzuzu. The other members of the support crew were to stay behind with the brothers, who were aiming to look as exhausted as possible, even though they had only run a single mile from the reservoir.

At the roadblock the armed guards eyed me suspiciously as Henry quickly explained to them the purpose of my loitering. I did not feel confident that he had convinced them of my credentials when one of the policemen barked at me to step away from the tarmac and onto the grassy verge. With Henry gone, and my only company sporting stern looks and automatic weapons, I started to feel a little uneasy to say the least.

Another intimidating guard ambled across the road towards me. He was huge, but hoping he had a friendlier disposition than his colleague, I decided to strike up a nervous conversation. “Are you a football fan?” I enquired, wincing at the randomness of my question. The guard, ignoring my feigned enthusiasm, opted not to make eye contact and gruffly replied;

“No.”

I squirmed, racking my brains for another quality ice-breaker, but the huge policeman turned to catch my gaze and in a commanding voice asked; “What do you do?”

Thinking Henry had not made himself clear, I began to give a faltering synopsis of the events of the last 10 days.

“...and so now I’m just waiting here for my friends to arrive with the football...” I stammered.

“No”, the officer interrupted, getting visibly annoyed. “What do you do in England?”

“I’m a teacher” I said, now attempting to end the conversation. He glowered at me and using all the powers of his height, uniform and position to intimidate, stared me down.

“What can you do for me?” He asked in all seriousness.

“Sorry?” I asked, wishing that Henry was still around to bail me out.

Without a flicker of a smile the stern policeman asked again.

“What can you do for me?”

I began to sweat as my brain frantically strained to find a suitably polite, yet non-committal response.

As it happened, I didn’t need to offer a solution, because the police officer had exactly in mind what I could do to help him, and he didn’t feel any social embarrassment over asking.

“I have a brother” he began, resting a weighty hand on his rifle and the other on my shoulder. “He is 26 and he is still in education. You can help him. You can teach him English.”

Was that a question or a command? I started to panic.

“Yes, well...er, I’d love to, but unfortunately we’re going home in a few days” I squirmed, trying to look desperately apologetic that the fates had conspired to thwart my new vocation. “I’m not sure there’s going to be time I’m afraid.”

I could feel the policeman boring a hole in my skull with an imaginary beam from his eyes as I steadfastly gazed at my shoes. After a few seconds the game was up and I chanced a nervous smile. Suitably amused by my reaction, he reciprocated and patted me on the back as if to signify that I had passed some cruel initiation. “Oh well”, he laughed. “I wish you luck my friend.”

I grinned back, relieved yet decidedly not amused. What a joker.

I glanced at my watch. Where were they? Steve and Pete were taking their time, but maybe it was because some sixth sense had told them that our reception committee of dignitaries, journalists and excited onlookers were working on “African time”. The crowds had not materialised and it was almost twenty past mid-day before two well dressed women stepped out of a car and walked across the road to the curb-side shelter.

Audrey and Rita were from Action Aid and we had met them at the launch event in Lilongwe. Embarrassingly I didn’t recognise either of them and greeted them as strangers, but at last I had some company other than the policemen to chat to while I waited. It looked like the welcoming party would be a small one.

As I adjusted my camera to focus imploringly on the horizon once again, the girls from Action Aid pointed to a portly man in

a suit who had pulled up in his BMW and was now pacing up and down by the roadblock, muttering into a mobile phone. “It’s Anderson Zimba!” they said excitedly, as if he were the closest thing Malawi had to a celebrity.

A former international player and coach, Anderson Zimba was the biggest name (and biggest belly) in Malawian Football. Like his colleagues Roosevelt and Edington, he was surprisingly rotund for a former sportsman and advocate of the game. He was the President of FAM, another heavyweight role on their executive committee.

Anderson Zimba was no stranger to accusations of corruption, having been promoted from Vice-President after 3 members of the FAM executive were forced to resign because they did not hold the correct educational qualifications. FIFA, football’s world governing body were not happy with Zimba’s appointment and demanded the entire board of FAM be re-elected. Zimba refused. There had also been several rumours of dodgy loans and bribes being offered in return for positions, but in fairness to Zimba, nothing had stuck. Later in conversation Steve found him to be articulate and genuine. He was after all, here to support a good cause, and took the time and effort to walk with us to the St.John’s Centre.

Zimba’s phone conversation was about to be cut short as he glanced up to see the Fleming brothers appear on the horizon, pride swelling their chests, and nonchalantly passing the ball between them without breaking a sweat. This was the pinnacle of our challenge and watching the boys jogging the last few yards towards the roadblock was a strangely moving experience.

Forgetting my inhibitions I yelled “C’m on boys!” trying to fill the gap in atmosphere, but at that moment, as if responding to a clarion call, a truck-full of young people from the local youth club came from no-where and flocked to the roadside. Steve and Pete raised a triumphant arm and back-heeled the worn football

across the finish line. Hands were shaken, backs were slapped and interviews expressed joy, relief and excitement.

The 20 or so young people that had arrived at the last minute were waving home made banners promoting AIDS awareness. Many of them seemed shy of the camera, but some approached Steve and Pete with beaming smiles, eager to congratulate them. After convening with one of the youth workers Pete announced “We’re walking to the project – it’s 5 miles away!”

With over 250 miles behind us, the last 5 miles of the adventure certainly proved to be the most memorable. As we walked with the youth group, the ball was passed among the young men providing ample opportunity for skills and tricks to be displayed. The road began to fill with a growing vibrant crowd, chanting and singing as they kicked the ball between them. A couple of traffic policemen from the roadblock felt it necessary to accompany us on our journey to ensure safety while Henry crawled along in the ATV at the back of the procession.

The atmosphere was exhilarating. Another truck full of young people arrived along the road to join the carnival and soon the 50 strong crowd was in fine voice. The call and response singing was led by a teenage girl in a green dress, who, despite her tiny frame, possessed a massive piercing voice that galvanised the rest of the group. The quality of the singing, as we had witnessed at Luwawa, was incredible. Everyone was pitch-perfect and showed no signs of embarrassment or shyness about belting out some a-capella harmonies. The dancing too was impressive, and in between little touches and flicks of the ball, the boys from the youth group, many of them dressed in fashionable trench coats and beany hats, showed us their improvised yet skilful dance moves.

Rhythm was in the culture, and seemed to bring such joy to their community. It was the gel that bonded these people together, beyond family, beyond friendships and religion. In such

an immaterial world, it was a life-giving gift that everyone could afford to impart. There was certainly room for it in our culture, I thought, feeling slightly embarrassed at my own stiffness. Looking around at the rest of the crew, it was clear they were thinking similar thoughts. Pete and Steve, beaming from ear to ear were clapping out of time. The two Johns and Linda and Srinu were also enjoying the spectacle but looking decidedly out of place, like Salvation Army chaplains at a disco.

As we marched joyously along the main road towards Mzuzu, the carnival atmosphere increased and many children and adults who dwelt in the roadside huts came out to watch. Many of the more adventurous joined us for a stretch along the road. It began to dawn on me that the crowd of young people who were escorting us in such a jubilant fashion were not just proclaiming the success of the challenge. The banners they were waving and the songs they were singing had a clear message, and one that needed to be reinforced among the poorer people that lived along the roadside.

As I quickly nipped into the Landcruiser to grab a drink, Henry explained the meaning of the songs. "They are all about AIDS. They are warning the local people to be aware of HIV and to get tested" he said. "A lot of people, even in these suburbs have never heard of AIDS, and even if they have, there is a great deal of misunderstanding surrounding the nature of the disease."

Hitching a ride with Henry in the back of the Toyota were three smartly dressed young people who I guessed were not part of the youth group. They had plucked Steve from the throng and were thrusting Dictaphones at him. One was a journalist from the Malawi Nation, while the other two were national radio DJ's.

Their opening questions gave away the fact that they had only a small inkling about the story they had been sent to cover.

"So, you are footballers from England?"

“Yes, that’s right” confirmed Steve, “from Southampton and Cambridge”.

“And which one is Rio Ferdinand?”

After a rather laborious retelling of the Kick 4 Malawi story, Steve tried to steer the interview toward the reasons behind the challenge and the work of Action Aid and the St.John’s Orphanage.

“We wanted to do something to help young people in your country who are suffering from AIDS and to raise awareness of the current crisis both here and abroad” Steve explained. To his surprise, the journalists seemed openly cynical of this analysis.

“What crisis?” One responded. “AIDS is something that the government has invented to stop people having fun.”

It was a shock to realise that ignorance of Malawi’s AIDS problem was not just endemic among the country’s poor and illiterate. Even supposedly educated people, moreover the ones in positions of power to communicate good health messages, were sadly carrying damaging misapprehensions about the severity of the situation.

After trying in vain to re-educate the journalists, Steve mentioned that we had a song that they could play on their radio stations, and after rummaging around in the back of the van, produced the last 3 copies of the Kick 4 Malawi single. The DJ’s nodded laconically, took the CDs, and assured Steve they would play the song on their radio stations.

The march progressed for about 45 minutes and throughout that time, the slight girl in the green dress hardly paused to draw breath, belting out one catchy song after another. Even as I write, the tunes are indelibly printed in my mind, even if the words in Chitumbuka remain somewhat of a mystery.

About a mile before the road entered the city centre, we turned off onto a dirt track which led towards a series of hills to the east of Mzuzu. As we danced by leafy groves, many children from the surrounding villages came to join our progression down to the St John's orphanage that nestled in the valley below.

On the way we passed a dusty football pitch and some boys who were playing ran excitedly to join us. One eloquent youth I talked to on the path was keen to tell me his story. He was an orphan who had spent almost his entire life at St John's and was now, as all the older children and teenagers were required to do, spending his time looking after the younger children and tending the crops on the greener slopes. He had a passion for science and wished to continue an education which his circumstances had denied him. Then came the question I did not want to hear.

"Sir, will you pay for my education?"

The stare the boy gave me indicated that he was not looking for a quick buck from a passing Mazungu. He had an earnestness that was transparent. Here was another fleeting chance for him to better himself and leave his limited prospects among the hills and villages of Mzuzu.

But what could I say? I had no money to give him, or so I reasoned. The limited funds we had pooled for food and water was growing appreciably low, and with several days of our stay still to go, I was reluctant to give away my last remaining Kwacha. Then another practicality added weight to my initial reluctance to give. A generous act towards one individual would surely lead to an inundation of requests for cash. I decided uneasily that it was better to give of my time and direct money into the communal pot for the greater good. Action Aid was working with these communities and we had channelled £13,000 into their work in this area, money which would ultimately benefit this boy.

"I'm sorry" I said rather disingenuously, "I have nothing to give you". The boy turned away, visibly disappointed. I shrugged

my shoulders and opened my hands as if to demonstrate my answer, and noticed the gold ring on my finger. Something inside me jolted as if I'd been pulled back on a chain. I didn't need the ring. It held no value for me. It was 9 carat gold, worth only about £30; but even so, easily enough to pay for a term at a local secondary school. I'd like to tell you that I stopped the boy then from walking away and gave him my gold ring. I'd like to tell you that he accepted and walked away with a spring in his step, destined to begin a new life fulfilling his academic potential. But I'm afraid I didn't. Instead, I procrastinated, and gave birth to a regret that I still dwell on from time to time. And the boy walked on, almost certainly to continue a hard life illuminated with only the modest of dreams, his opportunities limited to begging scraps from the white man's table.

Down the dusty road, the swelling crowd gathered pace as it continued to sing and dance its way towards St John's. Everyone was running now to the rhythm of the songs that were reaching an excited crescendo. Then finally after descending one last slope, a sign that we were approaching our destination; a dozen older women wearing their best flowered chitengas and headscarves formed a dancing circle around us. They were carrying leafy branches which they waved in celebration as we passed. They too were singing, but the songs were older than the anti-AIDS rhetoric we had been dancing to. These were ancient songs of welcome performed and passed down through countless generations. I felt an incredible sense of pride to be honoured in such a way. As we arrived at the sparse collection of concrete buildings we knew to be the St John's Centre, one woman put down her welcome branch and began to dance around Steve and Pete, clapping her hands and ululating in a high pitched wail. It was all very thrilling if slightly embarrassing for the boys who bowed politely to the elderly lady and moved on towards the Centre.

The procession had reached its destination but the singing and dancing continued in a circular conga of joy and celebration. The noise was infectious and after a further 10 minutes or so the huge crowd which had grown to around 200, seemed to subdue slightly. Henry, who had followed down the bumpy dirt track had parked the van and was called upon to aid translation.

We were greeted by the manager of the centre, a young and energetic man who showed us around the small and rather dilapidated complex. The St John's AIDS Project was an offshoot of the St John's Hospital based in the city of Mzuzu. It was a community outreach that supported the hundreds of AIDS orphans in the hillside villages surrounding the city. They gave practical support to those left caring for the children (typically the older women of the community). There was also a school, youth group, and centre for practical learning. One of the buildings looked newer than the others and inside were a selection of watering cans and other farm tools that had been made by members of the youth project to sell. The building had been funded by the Mission Malawi project headed by Les Pratt, whom Steve had met the previous year. The building however, was unfurnished, and we were told that some of the £13,000 total that we had raised would go to finishing the building and paying for new wood and metalworking equipment for those learning new skills.

From the darkened building that would soon have electricity, we were taken outside into the bright sunlight, to where a brick outhouse had been reduced to rubble. The project's only toilet had been destroyed in the summer storms. Our funds would be used to rebuild it. We were also told that our money would pay for 3 new permanent members of staff to be employed as outreach workers, providing health education for the surrounding villages. There would also apparently be enough money left over to send a handful of the orphans to secondary school. I hoped beyond hope that one of those children would

be the boy who had approached me on the way to the centre and who I had since lost in the crowds.

After the brief tour we were ushered to a central square next to a concreted playground where some of the older children were playing basketball. The project had arranged a semi circle of plastic chairs for the team and dignitaries to sit on for the duration of a more formal welcome to the centre. In front of the chairs, the children were instructed to sit on the dry red earth. Many of the orphans were accompanied by older women, who had now become their surrogate parents. Missing were the hundreds of young mothers and fathers who had been taken by the disease. A whole generation ripped from the centre of a community.

The children listened to George Kawunda, the leader of the project, who stood to formally welcome the Kick 4 Malawi team. There was silence among the huddled mass of perhaps 100 children, save for the occasional coughs that were a certain sign of the illness that was attacking their immune systems; the same illness that had claimed their parents. Many of the children looked sick. Some appeared malnourished. All showed remarkable restraint as they sat quietly in the sweltering mid-day sun, swatting flies away from their faces and brushing the beads of sweat that trickled from their brows.

Soon Steve was asked to make a speech, which he was barely able to do, unprepared and still shocked by the scale of the overwhelming welcome we had received. Anderson Zimba also spoke about FAM's continued efforts to spread good health messages in the battle against AIDS. The three radio journalists sat listening impassively with crossed arms as the final speaker rose shakily. He was a representative from NAPHAM (the National Association for the Prevention of AIDS in Malawi) and he leant one hand on a nearby tree to steady himself as he spoke. He was in the advanced stages of AIDS and his voice was so weak I could barely hear what he had to say. In a sense his

appearance said it all. He was horribly gaunt and his clothes looked three sizes too big. As I looked around at the children sat in front of me I realised that for many, this would also be their fate. It was a sad conclusion, but an impossible one to avoid. I hoped that the radio journalists were beginning to see it too.

After the speeches were over, Steve approached the radio men for another interview and Pete and I chatted to some of the older members of the St John's youth group. Still dressed in their beany hats and overcoats despite the sweltering heat, the young people seemed mature beyond their years when it came to talking about the current crisis in Malawi.

"We want everyone to understand that sex can kill." One youth told me. "That is why we are keen to practise abstinence until we are married. There are many people in Malawi who don't care, who don't pay any attention to these warnings and we have seen them get ill and die." It was evident that these children had embraced the messages espoused by the Centre. And it was young people like these who represented a new hope for the future of their community, where gradually the workers and the home-makers – the mothers and fathers, would be replenished. It was a vision that St John's was determined to bring to fruition.

Next came the natural denouement of the challenge; a football match which Steve and Pete would take part in. As we walked back up the sun-baked path towards the football pitch at the top of the hill, a young lad of perhaps 6 or 7 clung to my hand like a limpet and offered me a grin that could melt stone. As we walked he chattered to me about his favourite football teams, what he liked best to eat, and what games he liked to play. His friends, following his lead, grabbed on to my other hand and arms and even legs so that I lagged behind the others who were nearly at the grassless playing field. I put one of the youngsters on my shoulders and lifted another of the smaller ones who was struggling to keep up. I was hit by a sudden wave of compassion for these fatherless children.

Approaching the pitch, still with five or six kids clinging to my legs, Steve and Pete were busy organising what seemed like upwards of 50 youngsters into 2 teams. Refereeing the match was an ex-Malawi international player whom Anderson Zimba had brought with him from Blantyre. Dressed in a smart track-suit on the basic pitch, he was the only one who looked even remotely ready to play a game of football.

It was decided that the only way to distinguish the teams was for one side to play without shirts. Pete was to play for the Shirts while Steve had drawn the short straw and had to play for Skins. I looked at Steve through my viewfinder as he pulled off his shirt to reveal an embarrassingly white body and remarked to the camera “He’s gonna burn”. On cue Steve trotted over to give me his shirt and echoed with a grin;

“I’m gonna burn.”

Despite running over 250 miles in the previous week and a half, Steve and Pete put an incredible amount of effort into the match and, knowing they were the centre of attention, went about using up the last reserves of their energy with gusto. Knowing also that they were the only players wearing football boots, in fact, footwear of any description, the Flemings reserved their choicest tackles for each other. So much so, their competitive rivalry was in danger of spilling over. One mistimed challenge on this bumpy pitch could result in a nasty injury, and I hoped for their sake that the game didn’t last longer than the 20 minutes they had agreed to at kick-off.

It was a scappy match with both sides hurling themselves at the ball without much thought for tactics or positioning. Pete’s team were first to score, but just before half-time Steve wriggled free on the wing and placed a low shot across the keeper to equalise. As he ran towards the camera with an ecstatic goal celebration I grimaced. “He’s going to kill me” I thought as I realised the camera was stuck on pause.

The game finished in a 2-2 draw and after much handshaking and photography, the boys jogged across to the Toyota and the next appointment in our crazy schedule.

We were 40 minutes late for our visit to the S.O.S Children's Village further along the main road. Almost as an afterthought we organised a makeshift presentation of balls and t-shirts to the youth group and waved goodbye to St John's. The children ran behind the van as it bumped and scuffed along the dirt track for a whole mile until we reached the main road. With arms and cheek muscles aching we turned to each other exhausted. "That was unbelievable" remarked Srini, and we nodded in agreement, unable to sum up in words what we had just experienced.

The SOS Children's Village in Mzuzu was barely 1 mile away from the St John's project but the difference between the two orphanages was staggering. With extensive sponsorship from donors around the world and backing from international bodies including FIFA, SOS could afford to build and maintain the best facilities for its orphans. A global and well established charity, SOS has orphanages in 123 countries, caring for over 60,000 children. Their mission is simple; to provide a family environment for orphaned and vulnerable children to grow within a nurturing atmosphere.

The complex at Mzuzu was new and extensive, with whitewashed, modern looking buildings and a well kept play area for the children. Again we were met with a formal presentation from the Director of the village, who welcomed us to the complex. We were introduced to one family unit where up to 10 children were being looked after by a full-time "mother" and "aunt". The children would be cared for until they reached 23. The leaders of these family units, often mothers themselves, spent weeks at a time at the village away from her own families, generally taking just 4 days off in every month. It was quite incredible to think of the sacrifices made by these few

astonishing women to take care of the huge amount of parentless children left to fend for themselves because of the AIDS epidemic.

Each family unit had a 4 bedroom pod to live in with a kitchen and a living area. We were guided round one pod by a mother keen to emphasise the merits of the S.O.S family programme, which focuses on play to counteract the trauma of bereavement. Unlike St John's, the environment was clean, bright and surprisingly modern. There was no doubting that SOS provided an excellent environment and quality of life for around 100 orphaned children in the district, but having come from St Johns, we realised that here was an opportunity only for the privileged few. There were thousands of children in the surrounding villages that could never hope to be blessed with a conventional family environment. The orphanages represented two differing approaches to tackling the problem. One, well funded and well organised, could afford to pluck a handful of lucky children out of the mire of circumstance and offer them hope and happiness for the future. The other, with minimal funding, struggled in isolation to provide at least something, however small, for the masses.

Outside in the well clipped gardens of the children's play area, Pete played ball with a six year old girl called Brenda. In her newly donated pink dress, she smiled sweetly as Pete made faces and gently threw the football to her. Showing infectious delight she caught the ball in her small arms and bounced it back to Pete. Brenda was an emblem of hope. But she also stood for the memory of countless others like her, whose world she had left behind.

CHAPTER 19 SAFARI

It was dark by the time we arrived at Makuzi Beach, but I could tell instinctively that we had entered a comparative paradise. The resort nestled on the north-west shore of Lake Malawi was just an hour's drive from Mzuzu, but supping beer on the hotel veranda with the warm waters of the lake gently lapping against the rocks below us, we could have been a thousand miles away from St John's.

The team was exhausted but still buzzing with adrenaline after the extra-ordinary events of the day. As we ate a magnificent dinner of fresh chambo caught that day in the lake, we all felt we had deserved our moment of luxury. But the food began to stick in our throats as we remembered the poverty we had witnessed. Where did this guilt come from? We'd done our bit hadn't we? We'd raised enough cash to make a significant difference to a project in need of repair. We could relax now surely? Well no. We all felt it. After the euphoria came a strange melancholy. It wasn't enough. As the warm breeze blew the last wisps of cloud to unveil a full panoply of stars, I wondered if I would ever be able reconcile my feelings. Could anyone make a difference? Would it ever be enough?

The sun rose early above our beach-side rondavels as I slept on. Typically Steve and Pete were up at dawn. Unwilling to miss anything, they had witnessed a majestic sunrise over the lake.

With the sand just yards from my hut, I was finally lured from my lethargy and yawning, joined the boys in time to see an African Fish Eagle circling imperiously above the cliffs adjacent to the beach. The sun, still low and orange began warming the morning chill above the placid blue water that stretched eastwards as far as the eye could see. "This place is magnificent" I muttered to myself and the Flemings nodded in silent agreement.

The two Johns came wandering across from the hotel complex that nestled into the cliff and commented on the peaceful nature of the morning.

"It seems so quiet without all those kids" said John M, reflecting on the sense of disorientation we all felt now there was no purpose to the day. But the serene pastel sky and the calm rippling waves were enough to settle the most restless of spirits, and I for one could have happily stayed there all day.

As ever though, relaxation did not feature in the Fleming lexicon and after a quick morning dip in the vast lake we were on the road again. We had booked to stay for two nights at Liwonde National Park for a whirlwind safari and there was a tremendous air of excitement among the party that headed south along the coast.

For Henry, the release of no longer having to crawl along in second gear was irresistible, and putting his foot down, he did an impressive job of guiding the speeding Toyota through an obstacle course of domestic animals that strayed across the road. It was a scorching hot day, and being cooped up in the van with all our luggage wasn't a pleasant experience. By the time we stopped to eat in a small greasy café called the Golden Lion in the small town of Selima, we were too famished and thirsty to complain about the obvious lack of hygiene that accompanied our meals. Unfortunately for Pete and Linda, the dodgy food had repercussions over the ensuing days, but for Pete at least, the

small matter of a stomach upset could not spoil his enjoyment of a spectacular array of natural beauty and wildlife. For Linda however, the trip was effectively over, as she took to her bed for the remainder of our time in Africa.

As we journeyed toward Liwonde through an arid landscape of sun-scorched grassland and scattered baobab trees, the Toyota succumbed to a nail or sharp thorn, and for the second time the all-terrain vehicle hobbled to a lop-sided stop. As Henry changed the tyre, a group of children on their way home from school stopped to chat and play some football with us. We offered them some biscuits and water while we waited, but one child seemed strangely reticent to come forward and accept our company. "Oh don't worry about him" said one boy, as he took another bourbon from the packet, but we couldn't help but notice that he was different.

I walked over to the boy, who was perhaps 7 years old. He stared distantly and did not respond to my simple questions. I began to realise that he probably had significant learning difficulties. I aimed my camera at his round face and took a picture of innocence and helplessness. It touched my heart then and still does now when I look at his tatty clothes and wide brown eyes, vacant, yet appealing. With the Toyota fixed I hurriedly closed some biscuits into the boy's hands and climbed into the vehicle. Looking back as we drove away, I saw the older boys surround him and fill their cheeks with his share.

After a full day of travel, we finally reached Liwonde as the sun was approaching the horizon. Stopping at the gates of the national park to pay our entry fee, we noticed another group of children playing together in the dust by the roadside. They were squealing with delight as they ran and tumbled together all skinny legs and arms. They were kicking a makeshift ball of plastic bags tied together with string, just like the pictures Steve had seen on TV almost a year before. As we watched their determination to

enjoy the scraps from our table, it seemed as though the Kick 4 Malawi story had come full circle.

It must have been around midnight when I heard heavy footsteps outside the chalet and the cracking and slashing sound of foliage being stripped from a tree. As if the eerie call of a night owl and the echoing barks of the hippos down by the waterfront had not been enough to instil a fear of the wilds around me, now there was definitely something large just metres away from the thin canvas walls of our chalet. Remembering what the guide had told us earlier in the evening I resolved not to panic and tried to get back to sleep. In the adjacent tent, Steve and Pete were feeling more adventurous and having been woken, were peering tentatively through the wire mesh windows at a huge bull elephant as it proceeded to demolish the tree that stood between our chalets.

Liwonde was everything you'd imagine an African safari to be. The only thing missing was David Attenborough lurking in the undergrowth, but our guide McCloud did his best to show us the wealth of life that proliferated along the verdant shores of the Shire River. There were baboons and warthogs wondering around the Mvuu camp complex where visitors stayed in flimsy but cool canvas chalets. We enjoyed bird-watching trips up and down the river where Henry practiced his skills of identification, in readiness for his exams to become a guide. And as we sped along the still water, hippos grazed in their hundreds along the banks and crocodiles, disguising themselves as fallen logs, lay in wait in the shallows. Our most exhilarating discovery was the herd of elephants we found bathing at the shore and McCloud manoeuvred the small motorboat close enough for us to get amazing pictures of the powerful creatures as they played in the cool water and sprayed each other with their trunks.

Despite their 250 mile dribble, the lure of football proved irresistible for the Flemings, and back at the camp we played keepy-up on the lawn that separated our chalets from the river. There was no fence around the camp and we were a little disconcerted to see huge monitor lizards and baboons the size of children roaming between our holiday homes. Later as darkness fell on the camp and the cicadas hissed with the steam rising from the river, the calls of hippos along the bank made us fully aware that we were at the mercy of the natural environment.

Finishing our evening meal we spotted several of the guides running nervously across the camp clinging to their walky-talkies. We asked one of them if there was a problem. He told us matter-of-factly that a bull elephant had been spotted near to the camp. When we asked if we should be concerned he shook his head, but then added rather paradoxically that last year a tourist had been killed by a rogue elephant that had strayed from its herd. With our fears only partially allayed we returned to our chalets for our second night in the wilds, only to be awoken in the early hours by a loud rustling noise.

The next day after sharing our near death experience, we took the short boat trip back across the river where our ATV waited to take us the 3 hour journey back to Lilongwe and our flight home. Before reaching the airport we stopped at a bustling market to collect souvenirs. With his money gone Pete bartered his sweaty trainers in exchange for a couple of hand-carved wooden ornaments.

At the airport we said an emotional farewell to Henry who clung to the Southampton football shirt we had given him as a gift and shook our hands warmly. Henry had become a fully fledged member of our team and in between episodes of his melodic laugh, he told us in all seriousness of his pride at having been involved in the challenge. "I will miss you all" he said, unloading the last of our belongings from the beige Toyota

Landcruiser with its cracked windscreen, before saluting us sombrely, minus the usual grin. Henry had been our guide and interpreter for the last fortnight, but he had become a friend; the personification of the Warm Heart of Africa, and someone we would all remember fondly.

I looked around me on the plane to Johannesburg. Pete was sleeping soundly; John McCarthy was checking through his digital photos and the Bandi's were gazing out of the window as we said goodbye the vast African plains beneath us. We were leaving one of the world's poorest nations, but we had seen enough to have great cause for hope. Malawi was a country rich in resources, with a vibrant people willing to embrace the future. But it also needed a helping hand, and we had seen plenty of well-meaning organisations making a real difference. Investment, education and good government were the keys to unlocking the strangleholds of poverty and disease.

Sitting beside me, John Fleming was studiously working on a solution to Malawi's irrigation problems. Ever since our conversation with George Wardlow at Luwawa, he had been grappling with the complex issue of how to implement simple irrigation technologies that could put an end to famine and crop destruction. It was a lofty goal, but John had just the sort of analytical brain that could at least attempt a solution. Consistent distribution of water could mean the difference between life and death to so many in Malawi, as well as a ready supply of tea should John ever wish to return.

Then there was Steve. His look betrayed a maze of emotions he was reluctant to explore. His thoughts were primarily with Claire and he felt a pang of guilt that he might have neglected her. This adventure had started as a means of escape from the emotions he feared more than danger. Now the realistic possibility of more failed IVF treatment and the accompanying emotional tumult loomed with his homecoming. He was pensive about the future, but also exhilarated by the life-changing

experiences of the previous fortnight. Kick 4 Malawi had been more successful than he had ever dreamed. The £13,000 we had raised would make a small but significant difference to the hundreds of orphans at St John's. Moreover, our challenge had inspired the Football Association of Malawi to further work in the fight against AIDS. And beyond this, Kick 4 Malawi had convinced Steve that Football could be used as an effective tool to raise the profile of development in Africa, and the seed of this realisation was already growing shoots in his imagination.

CHAPTER 20 **KICK4LIFE**

Even before the plane had touched down Steve and Pete were discussing the next challenge, but rather than constraining their thoughts to a single fundraising event, the brothers were determined to put into action a long term vision that encapsulated what they had learned; that the power of football could be harnessed to affect a lasting change. Their logical conclusion was that they should begin a charity that would use football as a tool for education and development, particularly in relation to the AIDS epidemic in Africa. It wasn't long before the idea of Kick4Life was being nurtured.

Back in the UK it took a little under six months before our application to the Charity Commission was successful and in November 2005, Kick4Life became a registered charity. Pete decided to quit his physiotherapy degree to volunteer full time, and I was enormously proud to be among its founding trustees. Steve also took the chance to re-direct his career and accepted a job as Head of Marketing and Communications for Street League, a charity that uses football to bring hope to disadvantaged people in inner-city London, while he continued to guide Kick4Life in his spare time.

With an inspiring vision and Pete's time and energy, the Fleming brothers built a mission statement that stayed true to the elements that made Kick 4 Malawi such a success, but one that was broad enough to allow the charity scope to develop its

vision. Kick4Life would seek to engage youth in the world's poorest countries through the power of football, empowering them with skills to adopt healthy lifestyles, to live HIV free, whilst linking those with the disease to relevant support networks. In addition to delivering HIV education, Kick4Life would also aim to break down stigma and discrimination attached to HIV/AIDS; provide support for those living with the disease; create a direct link between sport-based prevention programs and health services; and raise awareness of global poverty and disease in the UK.

These objectives were worthy but vast in scale. Steve and Pete needed to pin down their mission to a location and a tangible initiative. The obvious choice for operations was Malawi; a nation we had all become quite attached to, and one with a great need. But as we had seen during our challenge, the country was not short of NGOs. Would another organisation add significant weight to the work already being done? Also, David James, fresh no doubt from being mistaken for Stephen Fleming, had also been inspired by his trip to Malawi, and had established his own charity to help the disadvantaged in the country. Although the vision of the David James Foundation was very different from that of Kick4Life, the link between football and development would draw inevitable comparisons.

With this in mind it was decided that the charity should begin its delivery in a different country, one with a high degree of deprivation and an urgent need for help in the battle against HIV. Lesotho was a nation that fitted the bill. With an HIV prevalence rate of 23%, the third highest in the world, this tiny African state with a size and population equivalent to Wales, is a country struggling to combat a rampaging AIDS epidemic. Completely surrounded by South Africa and penned in by the Drakensburg Mountains, Lesotho is isolated geographically from the rest of the world, yet heavily reliant on its larger and wealthier neighbour. It is also a proud nation with a rich heritage, and like Malawi, owes its existence, at least in part, to the expansionist

machinations of Victorian Britain, the history of which, you may be glad to know, I will leave for another time.

Not wishing to reinvent the wheel, Pete began looking for other organisations that were using football to affect change in Africa. One of the first he came across was an American charity called Grassroot Soccer. GRS was founded in 2002 and had already been enormously successful in its mission to use the power of football to educate young people on the dangers of HIV. The charity had developed its Grassroot Soccer Curriculum; a course of football related games and activities that teach young people about AIDS and healthy lifestyle choices. The games are simple, fun, and contain important messages that break down the stigma attached to the disease and encourage prevention. With pioneering roll-outs of the scheme in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe gathering momentum, Grassroot Soccer was on the lookout for implementing partners to take the curriculum to new countries and Pete wasted no time in contacting GRS and expressing his wish that Kick4Life could take the curriculum to Lesotho.

Armed with a list of contacts from the High Commission, Pete embarked on a fact finding trip in the spring of 2006. With little more than the mission statement he and Steve had put together, and the GRS curriculum as a working model, Pete's gift for communication was soon inspiring some people in high places to come on board with the Kick4Life project. Pete was also fortunate enough to meet Baba.

Baba Malephane worked for LeFA, the Lesotho Football Association and was just about the most well connected person in Lesotho. As well as introducing Pete to the football fraternity, Baba had friends in the Lesotho government and connected Pete with several NGOs working in the country such as the Baylor College of Medicine and the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative. These

organisations were able to give him an understanding of the work already being done to provide important anti-retroviral treatment to those infected with HIV, and to turn the tide of public apathy and misinformation surrounding the disease. One of the greatest problems was encouraging people in Lesotho to get tested for HIV. Many were fearful of the consequences of being found HIV positive, many were embarrassed or ashamed to be tested, while others believed the crisis had been blown out of proportion and therefore regarded testing as unnecessary. Whatever the reasons, and despite the Lesotho government's "Know Your Status" campaign, less than 10% of people in Lesotho knew their HIV status, and this was a big contributing factor to the spread of the disease and low detection rates among the estimated 23% of the population who were infected. Pete returned from Lesotho with a clear understanding of how Kick4Life could make a positive difference.

Having adopted the Grassroot Soccer model, Pete began planning ways to deliver the "Good Health through Sports" Curriculum, which later became the Kick4Life Curriculum. Initially he began training coaches to take the K4L Curriculum out to rural areas where it was needed the most.

Back in the UK we all realised that significant funding was needed to continue the work. Pete's flights to Lesotho were costly and he decided that the best thing would be for him and his wife Susie to relocate as soon as possible. In the mean time Pete and I were reunited with Phil Le Cheminant who allowed us to use his studio and expertise to edit footage of the Malawi challenge to create an hour-long documentary which would promote the work of Kick4Life. The completed video was aired on May 6th 2006 during the charity's official launch at the St Mary's Stadium in Southampton. The evening was a great success with hundreds of our friends and family members (and a smattering of VIP's) in attendance. Among them were our first

official ambassadors; the Football Freestyler Mike Delaney, who had starred in Peter Kay's famous "Have it" advert for John Smith's, and local glamour model Lucy Pinder.

The summer of 2006 saw more fundraising activity with Pete and a handful of his football mad friends embarking on a crazy challenge to complete one million keep-ups during the World Cup finals in Germany. The improbable feat was completed with the help of fans from all 32 countries participating in the tournament, and Pete flew out to Lesotho to tick off the final few thousand kicks with the children he was aiming to help. Whilst in Lesotho, Pete was invited to be a pundit on Lesotho's live TV coverage of the World Cup Final between Italy and France, a fantastic opportunity for him to plug the charity as well as deconstruct Zinedine Zidane's inexplicable head-butt.

Later in the year Pete resumed his fetish for wearing huge animal outfits and entered the Mascot Grand National as Mickey the Kick4Life Monkey. The race is an annual event that sees a selection of colourful and furry club mascots tackle a 150 metre track at Huntingdon racecourse. Since the demise of "It's a Knockout" the race had attracted huge crowds and a TV audience with the silly premise of seeing scores of grown men in costumes falling over. This was the third time Pete had entered the event, and having come second in 2004 as Supersaint, he was determined to win this time. Despite frightening children in a costume that looked more like Freddie Krueger than a monkey, Pete romped to victory and gained some important exposure for Kick4Life in the process.

The Million Keep-ups Challenge and recent media exposure netted Kick4Life £3,500 and with a successful funding application from the Vodafone Group Foundation worth £60,000, Pete was able to begin operations in Lesotho.

With his base established Pete work on a new idea jointly conceived with GRS that aimed to break down stigma, encourage

HIV testing, and take the Kick4Life Curriculum out into rural communities. Test Your Team was essentially a football tournament, but one with a difference. Pete planned to attract young people in a particular region to take part, and invite local clinics to set up tents where people could get tested for HIV. Coaches trained in the Kick4Life Curriculum would also be on hand to organise the matches and take HIV awareness sessions. The event would be a fun celebration of football, but would also help to break down misconceptions and stigma, and encourage youth to know their HIV status. Participating teams would earn tournament points not just for winning games, but also for getting tested and participating in the awareness activities. Any young people who were found to be HIV positive would receive counselling and referral to a local clinic for treatment.

The idea was simple, but had the potential to breathe life into Lesotho's "Know Your Status" campaign, and ultimately change a nation's beliefs about AIDS and corresponding lifestyle choices. The first Test Your Team event took place in Maseru, the nation's capital, in March 2007 with girls and boys from 24 local schools taking part. The event was run in partnership with LeFA, the Clinton Foundation and the Baylor Clinic, who were able to test 450 people for HIV. The day was a great success with players from Lesotho's national team acting as AIDS educators and the country's Minister for Sport also taking part. It was the first time anything like it had been seen in Lesotho, and it enabled the charity to further its links with other NGO's and organisations within Lesotho.

One such burgeoning relationship was with Sentebale; the charity which Prince Harry set up with Prince Seeiso of Lesotho after spending his gap year working on AIDS related projects in the country. Pete and Steve were able to make some firm links with the organisation and when Pete and Susie finally moved to Maseru in August 2007, Sentebale generously offered Pete the use of an office at their Lesotho headquarters.

With Pete making strides with the delivery of K4L's awareness campaign, Steve set to work on yet another fundraising initiative in the UK. The Kick4Life All-Stars Tour was a charity challenge with a difference. Steve planned to gather a squad of footballers to travel out to Lesotho, play a series of matches and take AIDS awareness sessions with schoolchildren across Lesotho. In return for raising £2,200 worth of sponsorship for K4L, tour members would receive an all expenses paid trip of a life time. By January 2007 we had a squad of 16 players signed up for the tour, all raising money for Kick4Life. One tour member, Greg Baker was fortunate enough to raise £5,000 when he decided to write to the Fulham defender and German International Moritz Volz. Just weeks after receiving the letter from Greg, Volz happened to score the 15,000th goal in the Premier League. His prize for doing so was a cheque for £15,000, a third of which he donated to Kick4Life.

The first Kick4Life All-Stars Tour of Lesotho in November 2007 was a fantastic success, with £35,000 being raised for the charity and a life changing experience had by all who took part. A highlight of the tour was a game between the All-Stars and a team of ex-Lesotho Internationals. The match ended in a respectable 1-0 defeat for the All-Stars, who played out of their skins, exhilarated to be able to pit their skills against a team of international footballers.

The tour corresponded with a much publicised visit from Prince Harry to a Test Your Team event in the rural region of Mophale Hoek, and as the year ended the charity seemed to be going from strength to strength. Pete's energy and skills as a communicator meant that Kick4Life continued to gain plaudits and recognition for its work in the field. In February 2008 it received a "Best Performing HIV/AIDS Implementing Partner" award by the Lesotho National AIDS Commission. In March the charity joined "streetfootballworld", an international umbrella

organisation partnered with FIFA, to support football for development projects across the globe.

Then in April, Kick4Life achieved its biggest coup when it played host to England Manager Fabio Capello at a Test Your Team event in Maseru. The usually unflappable Capello, with an army of journalists and media photographers in tow, witnessed a young lad being tested for HIV and admitted that it was one of the most moving experiences of his life. The boy's test turned out to be negative much to his and Capello's relief, and later in the month the Sun newspaper flew the boy over to England to meet the England team and see a match at Wembley.

As you would expect, the exposure for the charity was incredible and Steve was inundated with people wanting to get involved in one way or the other. After a TV appearance on BBC Breakfast News, Steve decided to take the plunge and go full time for the charity as UK Director of Development. With a new investment from Vodafone, some high profile ambassadors, and most importantly, thousands of lives being transformed in Lesotho, Kick4Life is on the brink of expanding its operations to reach many more young people.

When I look back at how far we have all come from that rude awakening in the summer of 2004, I can't help but feel amazed and proud at what has been achieved. Thousands of lives have been changed and given a new and positive direction by the charity. People like 17 year old Lerato.

Lerato discovered that she was HIV positive in 2007 when she was persuaded to come to a testing event with friends. Her story is remarkable, not because she was found to be HIV positive; hundreds of young people who have been tested through Kick4Life events have been similarly diagnosed and referred to life-saving treatment. Lerato's story is remarkable because of the positive and life-affirming way that she has dealt with the potentially devastating news of her status.

“Yes it was a big shock” Lerato told me on a visit to Maseru in March 2009, “but I had a great counsellor who told me that being HIV positive was not a death sentence. I was referred to a local clinic and put on a course of medicine. Knowing my status meant that I could gain control of my life and get the treatment I need to live normally.”

Determined to use the knowledge of her status as a force for good in her community, Lerato became a peer educator for Kick4Life and now speaks to crowds of hundreds at Test Your Team events, encouraging young people to find out their HIV status. “So many people are scared to get tested. They think that they will die if they are HIV positive, so they don’t want to know. I tell them that is not the truth. Getting tested was the best decision of my life. Now I am working for Kick4Life, I get to meet important people and speak about my story. I love my life!”

Thanks to Kick4Life and other similar organisations, life is looking brighter for many in Lesotho, and for me back in the summer of 2005, life definitely seemed to be on the up.

EPILOGUE

July 4 2005 and I was on a high. It was my birthday and Pete delivered my best present in years. “Let me buy you a drink my friend” he said in his laconic way as we entered the pub at the end of my road. “I’ve been in touch with our DJ friend in Lilongwe.” He continued with a grin. “Remember Myessa, the Arsenal fan we met at Civo Stadium? You’re not going to believe it, but it seems the Kick 4 Malawi song is proving to be a big hit out there! Apparently it’s number 3 in the mid-week charts, just behind Eminem and The Backstreet Boys! He reckons it’ll hit the top spot by the weekend!”

“What?” I stared at him incredulously and began to laugh. “How can that be, we haven’t sold any copies!”

“Well, there aren’t many records sold in Malawi, so their charts are compiled according to how much radio airplay a song has received. According to Myessa the stations are playing it all the time. We’re gonna have an international Number One hit record!” We fell about laughing.

Later in the week I held a birthday party at my house in Southampton to celebrate and couldn’t help but drop my new found fame into as many conversations as possible. “By the way, did I tell you I’m currently Number One in Malawi?!” Most people thought it was a joke, but whether they believed me or

not, for a previously shy and awkward socialite, it was a brilliantly bizarre ice-breaker that gave me just the boost of confidence I needed. Buoyed by a mixture of alcohol and bravado I sidled up to the prettiest girl in the room and began a conversation.

Emily Moon was a friend of a friend. The sort of girl I admired from afar because I'd always assumed she was out of my league. She had an engaging personality that drew me in, and a beauty that matched the rich assonance of her name. To my surprise I found that talking to such perfection came easy. She was interesting, witty and funny and what was more, she made me feel interesting - and I hadn't even told her about the song.

Inevitably though, I found it hard to resist.

"So, what do you do?" She asked, as we stepped outside to sip wine in the moonlight.

"I'm an international recording artist..." I replied tongue in cheek. "I'm big in Malawi."

"You're what?!" she said sceptically, puncturing my ego with a withering look.

"Well, no, I'm a teacher actually, but I recently recorded a charity song with some friends and amazingly it's currently on top of the charts in Malawi!" There was a silent moment of disbelief that I felt obliged to dispel. "Would you like to hear it? Wait here, I'll get a copy."

That could and should have been the end of it, and sure enough when I returned, clutching a CD like an excited schoolboy at show and tell, Emily had made her excuses and was on her way home.

Fortunately my fresh confidence lasted more than just one evening, and after a couple of false starts, I managed to pursue the lovely Emily Moon all the way to the altar at Highfield Church, where we were married in June 2008. Pete applied his

useful foghorn voice as our Master-of-Ceremonies and Steve was my Best Man. In his speech Steve alluded to our adventures and the charity that was now taking up so much of our time. Claire looked on proudly as her husband's gentle mocking brought a ripple of laughter and applause from the wedding guests. John and Jean Fleming were among them; seeing their son's childhood friend finally tie the knot. But there were two Flemings who weren't at the wedding. They were being looked after by Claire's parents back home in St Neots; Steve and Claire's gorgeous two year-old twin daughters, Amelia, and my God-daughter, Isabella.

Eleven by Steve Fleming

Focused on eleven individuals *Eleven* contains stories of how football can transform the lives of disadvantaged people around the world. Each story focuses on a different social issue from drug and alcohol abuse to HIV, poverty and gang crime, and looks at how the power and popularity of football has inspired people to turn their lives around. Based on the work of organisations from countries such as India, Uganda, Colombia and the UK, the stories also tell how the Development through Football movement has emerged over the last ten years. With a foreword by England coach Fabio Capello, who speaks of his own experience of football being used to tackle HIV in Africa. He champions the book's message that football has a role and a duty to do more in promoting social development. The book is co-edited by streetfootballworld, who are partnered with FIFA to run the Football for Hope programme, and who will be promoting the book in the run up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

'This book is a testament to the extraordinary power of football to transform people's lives for the better.

- The Daily Telegraph

What shines through...is the dedication of the charities and individuals to make a difference to young people's lives and the remarkable response to football regardless of place, religion or gender. Far removed from the occasional excess and greed of modern English football this book reminds us that the game can be such a force for good.

- Sam Wallace, Chief Football Writer, The Independent

