

Three Cheers for Emilio!

by

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Emilio raced down the field, his eyes fixed on the black and white soccer ball. Over and over it turned as he dribbled in perfect control. Left foot . . . right foot . . . left foot . . . right foot . . . Emilio and the ball flew toward the goal.

The score was tied, 2-2. Time was running out. Emilio could already feel the triumph, see everyone crowding around, cheering him for scoring the winning goal. Just a few more seconds and he'd have it.

Oh no! Three players in bright red shirts ran between him and the goal, blocking his shot. Emilio slowed down, still protecting the ball with his feet. He ran to the left, looking for a space to make the goal. But there was no opening.

"Emilio! Over here!" Emilio looked to his right. His teammate Sean, in a white Eagles jersey like his own, was shouting and waving his arms. Emilio could see that Sean had a clear shot at the goal.

Fast as a rocket, Emilio passed the ball to Sean. Sean trapped it, then shot it toward the goal. The goalie dived for the ball but couldn't reach it. Score! And just in time. The referee's whistle ended the game. The Eagles had won!

Sean waved at Emilio. "Great pass!" he shouted.

Seconds later, a crowd of white shirts surrounded Sean. "Way to go! "What a kick!" "Three cheers for Sean!"

The words drifted across the field to Emilio. He stood alone. No one even knew he was there. He pushed his dark hair out of his eyes and kicked the ground.

Another teammate, Tony, raced by. "Great ball work, Emilio," he yelled over his shoulder. Then he joined the cheering crowd around Sean. Emilio looked up and forced a smile. But he stayed where he was.

He was glad they won the game, but just once he wanted to be the hero. Just once, he wanted to go home and tell his *Mami* and *Papi* that he had scored the winning goal. He could see the pride in *Mami's* eyes and hear *Papi* say, "See, Emilio, I told you. America is a good country for us."

But it didn't happen. It never happened. Nothing had been right since his family left Costa Rica to come to the United States. The winter had been so cold, and English was so hard.

This morning in school the teacher had returned yesterday's spelling test. He failed again. How could anyone spell English? He had spelled "throw" right. How could he know that cookie "dough" was spelled differently? They sounded the same. He longed for his beloved Spanish . . . soft, like music . . . where you spelled words the way you said them.

Only when he played *fútbol*, or soccer as they called it here, did he feel at home. In Costa Rica, all the boys dribbled *fútbols* on the way to and from school. Emilio felt that the ball was part of him.

"No one can handle the ball the way you can," said Coach Steve.

Other teams saw it, too. They guarded Emilio carefully. Whenever he got close to scoring, their defense double- and triple-teamed him. Emilio had to pass and watch someone else get the goal. And getting the goal was all the *Americanos* saw. Now there was only one more game, one more chance.

The morning of the last game was sunny and warm. The field had been freshly mowed. The damp cut grass smelled as sweet as the field behind their house in Costa Rica. It was a Saturday, and *Mami* and *Papi* had come to watch.

"Hi, Emilio," said Sean, making room for him on the bench. "We're gonna cream 'em, I can tell."

Emilio frowned. "Cream 'em?"

Sean laughed, but in a friendly way. "It means beat them, win the game."

Emilio nodded, but he thought again what a strange language English was.

The Eagles lost the opening toss. The blue team had first possession. Down they advanced toward the goal. But the Eagles' goalie stopped the shot and threw the ball to Emilio.

Emilio dribbled it back up the field. He tried to score, but the goalie blocked his shot. Now the blue team had the ball again. They all raced back down the field.

Another kick, another block. Back and forth they flew. Once, Emilio got the ball away from a player who was dribbling toward the goal.

"Great tackle!" yelled Sean. But still, Emilio couldn't score.

Finally, the game was almost over, and the score was still 0-0. Emilio breathed hard as he dribbled the ball down the field. Time was running out. The ball moved fast between his feet.

Finally, his chance came. He charged toward the goal. Not again! Two blue-shirted players came in from the side to block his kick. Emilio looked around. Sean was clear. But he wanted that goal for himself. Should he try?

Emilio took a deep breath and kicked the ball . . . right to Sean's waiting foot. Sean shot the rolling ball. Goal!

The final score was 1-0. Once again, Emilio watched his teammates surround Sean with cheers and congratulations. He was standing by himself when *Papi* came onto the field.

"You are a great team player, my son," *Papi* said, putting an arm around Emilio. "I am proud of you."

Emilio shrugged. *Papi* won't be so proud at the banquet tonight, he thought, when Sean wins all the prizes.

That night, happy sounds filled the school cafeteria. Voices shouted. Chairs scraped. Knives and forks clattered. But when Coach Steve stood up, the room quieted.

"We had a great season," he said. "We're proud of all the boys."

He called up each team member. Everyone received a team picture and a patch for his jacket. Next came the special awards.

Finally, Coach Steve announced the trophy for best offensive player. Emilio wanted this award so much, he could almost hear his name. Please, please, he begged silently.

But the coach said, "Best offensive player is Sean Mallory. Sean broke the record for the number of goals scored in one season."

Emilio applauded with the others, but inside he fought back tears. *Fútbol* was the only thing he could do in this country—and even that wasn't good enough.

Coach Steve continued. "There's one more award, Most Valuable Player. It's extra special because the boys vote on it themselves. This award goes to the person who helped the team the most."

He paused. Emilio looked around the room. Sean, he thought. He had voted for Sean. Sean would get that too.

Coach Steve went on. "This year the award goes to someone who can handle the ball better than anyone. He always got the ball into scoring position and made most of our goals this year possible. He's a great team player and a new American—Emilio Martinez."

Emilio stared at the coach. Me? Most Valuable Player? But I thought . . . He felt *Papi's* hand on his shoulder. He turned to see a proud smile light up *Mami's* face.

Then everyone crowded around him. "I voted for you," said Tony.

"Me too," Sean said. "You set me up to score all the time." Then he yelled,
"Three cheers for Emilio!"

Emilio grinned. The cheers sounded wonderful—even in English.

THE END