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FOOTBALL RISING STARS

HARRY MEREDITH





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MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Rain poured onto the rooftop of the Parc des Princes in Paris. The stadium was filled with fans excited to watch their team play in a Champions League round of 16 tie. The home fans for Paris Saint Germain were confident, and they had reason to be:





they had come away with a 0-2 away victory in the first leg. The Manchester United fans, bunched together in the cold and miles away from home, knew that tonight was going to be difficult. They were coming up against the best team in France, while their own Premier League campaign had left much to be desired.

But this was the Champions League. And if there was a place for footballing miracles, this was it.

The teams emerged from the tunnel to the sound of the Champions League anthem. PSG were in their classic



home kit of navy blue and red, and Manchester United were wearing their pink 2017/18 away kit. The last player to appear from the tunnel was Marcus Rashford. Manchester United needed him to perform to the best of his ability if they were going to progress to the quarter-finals.

In the 2nd minute of the match, Rashford put pressure on the PSG defence as they passed the ball around at the back. This caused PSG defender Thilo Kehrer to play a loose pass towards his goalkeeper. Spotting his chance, the Manchester United forward

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Romelu Lukaku claimed the ball and charged through on goal. He rounded the experienced Gianluigi Buffon and passed the ball into the net. *Goal!* The away fans roared. Manchester United had halved the deficit. Did they have a chance of coming back to win the tie?

In the 12th minute, PSG went on the attack. The ball was played to Kylian Mbappé in the penalty box and he thumped the ball across the six-yard line. Juan Bernat ran to the ball and calmly slotted it into an open



net. PSG had brought the game level and restored



their advantage. The French champions, undeterred by the earlier setback, were not going to give up their lead without a fight.

Less than twenty minutes later, the ball rebounded to Rashford in the opposition's half. He tapped the ball to the right, creating space, and unleashed a fearsome long-range strike. The ball swerved past the defenders and was on course for the bottom left corner. The goalkeeper managed to get in the way, but the strike was so powerful he could not catch it. Instead it stung his gloves and rebounded into the penalty



area. The ball fell to the feet of Romelu Lukaku who passed the gift into an open net. Yes! There was still an hour of football left to play and all Manchester United needed was one more goal. Just one more moment of magic to shock everyone and knock PSG out of the competition.

The next major chance came in the second half – but it was for PSG. The ball was passed to the feet of Ángel Di María, a former Manchester United player. From inside the penalty box, he chipped the ball into the net. The home fans cheered and punched the air.

But their celebrations were abruptly halted. The linesman raised his flag. Di Maria was offside. Manchester United had gotten away with it, and they still needed just the one goal.

Chances fell to both sides in the remaining minutes, but no matter how hard they tried neither team could break through their opposition's defence. There were flying shots, diving saves, last-ditch tackles and amazing skills. But none of them led to the

winning goal. The clock was close to striking ninety minutes and the game



seemed to be over. Then Manchester United had one final chance.

Marcus sprinted with the ball towards the PSG goal, but there was no space for him. He looked to his right and saw Diogo Dalot charging towards the goal. Marcus' eyes followed his teammate's movement. With pinpoint accuracy he laid the ball off to Dalot, who shot at goal. The ball hit a PSG defender and bounced out for a corner. But as the ball hit the defender, Dalot raised his arms in the air.

'Handball!' he shouted. 'Handball, ref!'

The other Manchester United players



raised their arms too. The referee hadn't seen the offence and pointed towards the corner flag. He was giving a corner kick to PSG. But as the team readied themselves to take it, VAR intervened. The referee was told that the ball might have hit a PSG defenders' arm. He went to look at the monitor. The shot was replayed over and over again, making sure that they checked every angle to make the correct decision.

The entire crowd fell silent: the PSG fans in fear; the Manchester United fans in hope. The referee turned from the monitor, brought his whistle to his



mouth ... and pointed to the penalty spot! The PSG defender covered his face with his hands. The home fans booed, and the away fans cheered. Now Manchester United had a last-gasp chance to win the game.

As Manchester United's penalty taker, it was up to Marcus Rashford.

He placed the ball on the spot and walked to the edge of the box. The home fans jeered, trying to put him off. The goalkeeper swayed his arms and clapped his gloves together.

Marcus placed his hands on his hips, breathing slowly. The noise around

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him started to fade away. He visualised where he was going to put the ball and focussed on one thing and one thing only. That was to score the winning goal and send his team – his boyhood team – through to the next round of the competition. The referee blew his whistle.

Marcus ran up to the ball and smashed it into the back of the net!

Goal! He sprinted into the corner, celebrating as loudly as his lungs would allow him. The Manchester



United supporters cheered and hugged at the away end.



Marcus had done it. Now all they needed to do was hold on to the lead.

After a tense few minutes, the referee blew the whistle for the final time. The game was over. Marcus led the charge towards the celebrating away fans and the rest of the team sprinted with him across the pitch. A United fan through-and-through, Marcus reached the advertising boards and raised his fist in the air. Ten years earlier he would have been back home watching the goal on his TV. Tonight he was the one on the pitch.

A Manchester United hero.

[END OF FREE EXTRACT]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



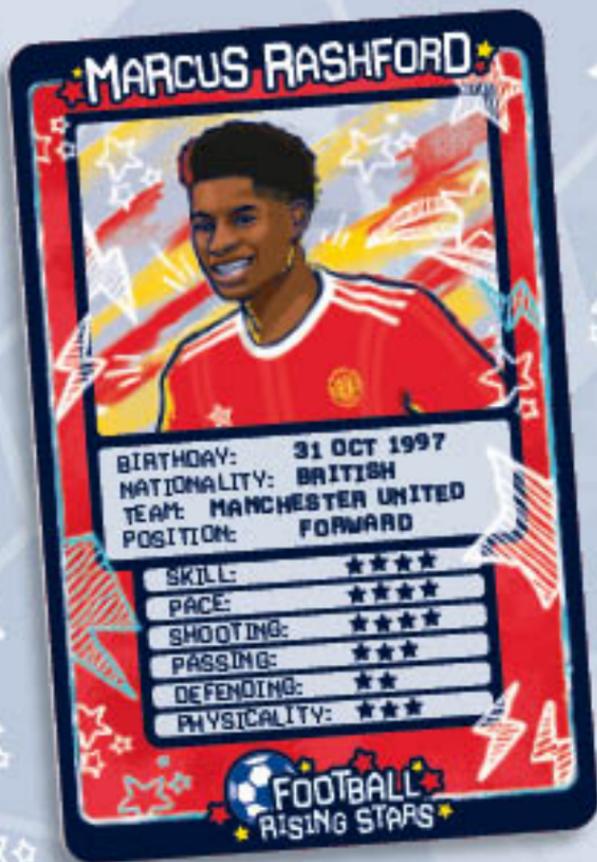
HARRY MEREDITH

What a striker! Harry Meredith writes stories for children and also works in e-commerce.

He studied Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, where he majored in Children's Literature and Non-Fiction. He also studied in the USA at Bennington College, Vermont. He's a football fanatic, and when he's not writing, working or heading out on adventures, you'll find him watching football.

FOOTBALL RISING STARS

Dive into the incredible journeys of
the world's best young players.



A talented forward for Manchester United, Marcus Rashford is a force both on and off the football pitch. From humble beginnings in Manchester, this young star shines brightly in the Premier League and beyond.

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