

On The Ball – Lin-Ling, Year 8, NSW

The ball was a blur of white; it whizzed towards you so fast you could hardly see it. If you were not quick or agile, if you did not know how to react on the spot, you would not stand a chance.

Viola was none and she could do nothing but watch the ball repeatedly being snatched from her hands. Countless times she was shoved onto the concrete by opposing members or elbowed in the gut. If not for the smirk her peers gave every time she fell, she would've thought she was invisible, sinking deeper and deeper into the ground.

With the biggest leer of all, was a tall, thin woman, lurking around the perimeters of the court like a cat ready to pounce. She had a shock of platinum hair and despite claiming it was natural, the brown roots became more prominent by the day. Her face was caked in powder and her lips were a bright cherry red. To call her Umpire would be an overstatement, a more suitable name would be Supervisor, but even that she was not very good at.

“Viola, faster!” the Supervisor called. There was scorn in her voice. At this, everybody in the field instantly eyed her.

She felt her face grow pink and her legs become heavy, until somebody snatched the ball heading to her mid-air. Yet another opportunity had been lost. Her teammates grumbled and she felt woozy as she trotted back to the centre of the court.

She already knew the teacher despised her, but never to this extent. It was times like these that made Viola rethink her choices. Who would've known that by caving into her friend's pleas to pick netball for their sport electives she'd be thrown into this deep end -- in a team full of weak beginners; while their opponents were a head taller and muscled with experience.

Licking dry, cracked lips, Viola felt relieved seeing the shooter from the rival team try to score only to fail and fail again. Even more so when the goalkeeper on her side saved the ball. But when it was passed to her, when frantic shouts rang, Viola's heart raced. She lunged, but so did another teen and soon they were on the ground, wrestling. In a proper game, the umpire would separate them and signal a toss-up, but the supervisor just stood grinning at the side.

“Come on Jasmine!” The audience, the teammates, even her own friends cheered. Gradually, she felt the ball slip from her grasp. She was sweaty, panting and weak; everything appeared bleaker.

“Yes Jasmine!” the teacher cried, “Let her have the ball, Viola! She got it first!” Becoming dizzy, Viola began to slip into a world of greyness.

Suddenly, the tiniest squeak came from nearby:

“You can do this, Viola.”

She was not sure who said this, or if it had even been real, but one last glance at each gleeful, entitled expression looming above made the colours sharpen again. The flint rubbed against

the steel and she remembered. Thought of the supervisor ranting on and on the other day about how Asians should not be in sports and how she had absorbed this undisturbed in front of everyone. She recalled her friends earlier, teasing her about her lack of skills, and how she had laughed them off. Lastly, she thought back on all the moments she had walked past girls who were trashing her puniness, only because there was nothing else they could gossip about.

If she could handle all of this, why should a 15-minute quarter at the end of a sunny, breezy day shut her down?

Slowly, the spark turned into a burn and soon her heart and lungs were on fire. Energy zapped through every vein with a tunnelling force, like electricity.

She fought her way for the custody of the ball, prying the other girl's fingers off bit by bit while sitting up. Jaw clenched in concentration, she put a leg up onto the ground to gain balance. Each shade and sound became fuzzy and zoned-out, everything except for the ball. Her opponent pushed and kicked her, poking the way through. She was sent backwards, her grip on the sphere easing off. Instantaneously she jerked forward and grasped it again, bringing it closer to her chest and tugging on it, hugging it almost. After many minutes of this, the other set of hands were finally jerked away from it.

Without hesitation, Viola sprung up and tossed the netball to one of her teammates, shouting their name and sprinting towards them. She was almost as fast as the wind.

On and on the ball was passed, till they were at their hoop. Viola widened her eyes at how tall and sunny it was at that spot, glancing around for any help at all. She tried to shoot, but it bounced off the edge. Before anybody could get it, she caught it just before it fell past the border line.

Stepping back and inhaling deeply, she recollected the advice the best shooter on the team had taught them before -- Point feet towards your target, stronger leg at the front. Bend your knees slightly. Tilt up your chin and hold the ball in one hand; curving your right elbow. Use your other hand for support, but don't use it to touch it. Look at where you want the ball to go, then flick your wrist. Don't jump, don't leap, just flick.

Viola puffed her cheeks like a blowfish, squinting then shooting. The bright, reflected rays of sunshine blocked her view, but gradually it faded. She held her breath. For a second it looked like the ball wouldn't make it, but then it rolled around the brim and after some swaying from side to side, toppled through.

Parting lips, the girl stumbled back. All the air left her lungs, as she stood, as immobile as everyone else. The ball bounced and trailed off, colliding with and then stopping at the gates behind. With time, a smile was picked up and then she was beaming, squealing with her eyes lit up.

Her team members began to whoop and clap her on the back while everyone else remained either stone-cold or with painted-on smiles.

The supervisor refused to look at her.

She began to skip away, but tripped and landed on the court, grazing her knees. At this, a few giggles were subdued and some pairs of eyes glared down at her. Glancing away, Viola shifted her gaze to the teacher, blending in with the background. She stood up, straightened her back and headed that way, extending an arm.

“You’re a great umpire Ma’am.”

The teacher looked at her, glanced down then scrunched her fists into balls and stormed off.

Viola scoffed and began to walk towards her water bottle, when a piercing scream caused her and everyone else to swivel around.

A white, brown-spotted blob had plummeted from the trees and was now seeping into the supervisor’s freshly washed hair. Initially, everybody was deadly quiet. Then, when one person couldn’t suppress giggles, everyone else joined in, keeling over cackling like how they had all those times Viola made a fool of herself.