

TALES FROM
THE PITCH

RASHFORD



HARRY CONINX

This is a fictionalised biography describing some of the key moments (so far!) in the career of
Marcus Rashford.

Some of the events described in this book are based upon the author's imagination and are probably not entirely accurate representations of what actually happened.

Tales from the Pitch
Marcus Rashford
by Harry Coninx

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TALES FROM THE PITCH

**MARCUS
RASHFORD**

HARRY CONINX

RAVEN



*For my sister Georgia, who spent a lot of time in goal
so that I could practice my shooting*

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I

THE COOLEST MAN IN THE STADIUM

March 2019, Parc des Princes, Paris, France

PSG v Manchester United

As Marcus looked around at the players who were sitting in the Manchester United dressing room, he couldn't fail to see that many of his usual team-mates were missing.

There was no Paul Pogba, no Alexis Sánchez, no Anthony Martial, no Juan Mata, no Jesse Lingard, no Phil Jones, no Ander Herrera and no Nemanja Matic.

“You could almost make a starting eleven out of all the players who’re injured or suspended,” Romelu Lukaku muttered next to him, following his gaze.

Marcus smiled at the Belgian striker, who’d only just come back from injury himself.

“This could be a long night,” he said quietly, “but I think we can do it.”

The nervous atmosphere in the Man United dressing room suggested that few of his team-mates felt the same way.

United had taken on PSG at Old Trafford two weeks earlier, in the first leg of this Champions League Last 16 tie, and they’d been comfortably beaten 2-0.

“If we couldn’t beat them at home, how on earth are we going to beat them here?” Andreas Pereira asked, voicing the one question that had been hanging over the whole team ever since that defeat.

Marcus turned to Man United’s new manager, Ole Gunnar Solskjær, thinking that he would reassure the youngster. But Ole was busy talking with his coaching assistants and hadn’t heard Andreas.

So Marcus stood up to look for one of the senior

players, to ask them to give Andreas some reassurance.

But then it occurred to him. Marcus was only twenty-one, but he was more experienced than most of the players in the squad tonight. *He* could set an example and inspire the team.

“We weren’t thrashed, Andreas,” Marcus said clearly and loudly, ensuring that everyone could hear. “It was nil-nil for most of that game – we just need an early goal tonight. We get that, then they’ll start to panic – and that’s when we have to take advantage.”

Team captain Ashley Young nodded in agreement. “We have to take risks today, lads,” he said, signalling for everyone to get to their feet. “We have nothing to lose tonight.”

Barely moments later, Marcus found himself standing out in the rain, listening to the familiar anthem draw to a close.

Taking a deep breath, he started working his way down the line of PSG players, shaking the hands of Kylian Mbappé, Ángel Di María, Julian Draxler, Thiago Silva ... the line of superstars seemed endless.

Each of these players oozed confidence, but within

two minutes of the starting whistle, everything had changed.

A sloppy back-pass by Thilo Kehrer was intercepted by Man United's Lukaku and the striker pounced, racing around PSG keeper Gianluigi Buffon before sliding the ball into the net.

United had the early goal they needed.

"Come on, Rom!" Marcus yelled, gesturing for the striker to come back to the half-way line. "We still need another two!"

Just as Marcus had told the team in the dressing room, Man United didn't want PSG thinking clearly. They needed to strike now, while the French team were panicking and making mistakes.

But 10 minutes later, PSG's quality showed. Kylian Mbappé got in behind and whipped the ball across the goal. Juan Bernat was waiting at the back post and he tapped it in.

United still only needed two goals to go through, but now, back at 1-1, PSG had their tails up.

Luckily for Man United the wet pitch was causing havoc for PSG's defenders – and every time they slipped

Marcus was able to get in behind them. But he was failing to capitalise on the opportunities.

“Marcus!” Ashley Young called over to him. “Have a shot. When it’s this wet, if it bounces it’s going to go all over the place.”

Marcus nodded and a few minutes later he got his chance, picking up the ball and fizzing a shot towards goal.

It wasn’t his best effort, but it skidded along the wet grass and Buffon failed to hold on to it. Lukaku was ready to pounce and he tucked in the rebound.

Now United were leading 2-1, but they were still behind on aggregate.

“We need one more, boys!” Marcus roared. “Just one more and we go through on away goals!”

But the goal wasn’t coming.

As the second half played out, PSG were dominant. Mbappé had chances, Di María had chances ... but time and time again, through a combination of luck and good defending, United held firm.

Marcus looked over to the bench, almost willing Pogba or Martial to appear magically to help rescue the game.

It wasn't to be, although manager Ole did send on Diogo Dalot and Tahith Chong, two players who were both still teenagers.

But when the game got back underway it was Dalot who made the difference. In the last minutes of the game he picked the ball up about 25 yards out and fired it towards goal. It deflected off a PSG defender and flew out for a corner.

“Come on!” Marcus bellowed, calling for United’s defenders to come up – but the ref had stopped play.

“What’s going on?” Luke Shaw asked, coming up behind Marcus.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“It was handball!” Dalot shouted, shoving his way past some of the PSG players. “I’m telling you, it was handball.”

The ref indicated that he was going to check the VAR screen, and then he jogged over to the touchline.

The whole stadium held its breath and Marcus looked at the scoreboard.

They were in the 89th minute. If a penalty was given, United would have the chance to do the impossible.

After what seemed like hours of deliberation, the ref finally marched back onto the pitch and pointed at the penalty spot.

While all the United players and fans roared in celebration, and all the PSG players and fans shrieked their protests, Marcus simply walked over and picked up the ball.

This was going to be his first professional penalty for United.

The PSG players were swirling about in front of him, arguing with the referee, gesticulating wildly, but Marcus ignored them.

There was only one thought in his mind, and he couldn't allow himself to overthink it.

Eventually, after all the commotion had subsided, he was able to step up, even though out of the corner of his eye he could still see some of the PSG players clashing with his team-mates behind him.

Blocking them out, he took several steps back and just stared at Buffon, who was looming large in the goal. This legendary goalkeeper had been playing Champions League football before Marcus was even born.

The referee blew his whistle and Marcus side-stepped to the left, then ran forward. He met the ball sweetly and fizzed it towards the top-left corner ...

GOAL!

It was 3-1 to United, 3-3 on aggregate – but United had the most away goals. They were through to the Champions League quarter-finals, under the most incredible, seemingly impossible circumstances!

Adrenaline surged through Marcus's body and he raced toward the corner flag, sliding across the wet turf in front of the United fans who'd made the trip to Paris.

He only had a second to see their euphoric faces before he was smothered by his team-mates.

“How'd you do it, Marcus?” Andreas Pereira shouted at him. “You were the coolest person in the stadium!”

Too giddy to speak, Marcus just laughed.

The truth was that he'd scored that penalty a thousand times already – each time as a little boy in his garden.

And when it came to stunning the world with game-changing goals, Marcus felt that he still had a lot more to give.