

‘Til I Die

In sloppy unison with the supporters surrounding him, Tim Rivington rose to his feet. A midfielder lifted a cross over the face of the goal. The entire section held its breath, going quiet short of the beat of a drum and the singing of the section capo standing on an old drum major stand in front. The ball seemed to hang in the air for a moment as a player in a yellow jersey matching that on Tim's chest leapt up to meet it with his head. The player made contact, but the shot glanced upwards and over the crossbar.

The specific tension of the chance dissipated, though the general tension of the night remained. Tim exhaled in frustration and looked to the scoreboard on the north end of the stadium: Columbus Crew 2, Chicago Fire 2. They'd just entered the 86th minute.

"That was fucking it, man." He muttered to nobody specific before raising his fist to punch down in frustration at the waist-high barrier separating in front of him. His fist made contact with the smiling visage of Tony the Tiger emblazoned over the blue field of a Frosted Flakes ad. The league couldn't afford those dynamic LED ad boards he'd seen in European matches, so they'd just duct-taped vinyl ad banners to the concrete fences on the field's perimeter for big games like this. They normally weren't there. Typically, they sat barren, but this was the 2008 Eastern Conference Final. This was on ESPN2. They'd brought Jack Edwards and Alexi Lalas out to commentate, and the league must've tried to make money off of all feasible ad space they could squeeze out of Columbus Crew Stadium's empty surfaces.

He shook his hand in self-inflicted pain and watched as the Chicago goalkeeper line up for the goal kick. He listened along to the capo, a heavyset man in his forties with long brown hair, a thick beard, and a custom yellow jersey reading "Crew Jesus," who sang towards the

supporters section, imploring them with frantic arm-waves to join in with him. Tim tried to jump in at the next verse.

“They say our days are numbered, we’re not famous anymore

But Columbus runs the country like we’ve always done before”

—

Tim and his friends had lined up to get their places at 11:30AM that morning. He’d asked for the Thursday night bartending shift off at Buckeye State Brewery as soon as the whistle blew on the semifinals. His head bartender, Roger, had asked him if he was sure it was worth it when he asked for the trade – Thursday was generally his best-tipped night. Groups of professors from both the music and English departments at the university, some of whom he’d studied under as an undergrad, tended to have weekly ‘team-building’ sessions at BSB on Thursdays and always acted generously, plus the start of fall Blue Jackets and Buckeyes hockey games brought in traffic. “You’re turning down a two-hundred dollar weeknight for a soccer game, Tim?”

Tim couldn’t have explained it to him. Roger was a classic Ohioan: Bengals, Reds, and Buckeyes only. He might watch a Jackets game if they’d ever stumble into competency, but the Crew were a foreign concept at best and the subject of mockery at worst to him. He hadn’t been there the way that Tim had, he hadn’t been there during his Freshman year in 2002 when the love affair between he and the club started – when Desmond, his floormate at Morrill Hall, a townie, offered him and anyone else on the floor that wanted to come along tickets to a playoff game against the San Jose Earthquakes, his dad got them at a steep discount from the club because they wanted to have a good relationship with the people who ran the youth soccer programs in the community, so Desmond had a block of eight to give out. He’d known there was a professional

soccer team in Columbus, but hadn't met anyone else with the same interest outside of his high school team and came to Ohio State knowing nobody.

The freshmen piled into Tim's mom's old Volvo 200 Station Wagon he'd driven down from Evanston, through Chicago, across Indiana, and into the heart of Ohio a few months prior, and made it to the stadium on a chilly September Thursday night. They fit themselves into the small but active support section behind the northern goal, singing along to the beat of the drums and the songs called out by the man with the mullet and beard on the drum major platform. Tim fist-pumped and high-fived with Desmond and the other guys who had made the trip out when Brian McBride slotted home the dagger in the eighty-first minute and, for the first time that semester, honestly wrote in his evening e-mail to his mother that he'd made friends.

Their match-going group had shrunken and grown over the six years between, losing most of the original guys from the dorms, adding in friends from classes, coworkers, and stragglers from other supporter groups met at pregame tailgates. They'd changed names multiple times too – Originally they were the Fourth Floor Hooligans, later becoming the Black and Yellow Brigadeers, briefly adopting simply The Braintrust before they dropped any pretense of being a supporter group stable or large enough to carry a name this year. The only constants were Desmond, Tim, and a dedication to getting into the front row.

At 11:30 that morning, Tim and Desmond met in the stadium parking lot. Kick was at 6PM, gates would open at 4, and they had to be at the front of the line to get down front. They brought out camping chairs and sat, alone, gradually working their way through a twelve-pack of

Yuengling for about three hours before anyone else showed up. They spoke of soccer, primarily, only lapsing into the uncomfortable topic of their lives since graduation briefly before returning to the debate over how many goals the Crew would win by as swiftly as they could.

It seemed like the only thing that they still found congruence with. Desmond's work stories – he'd parlayed his bachelor's degree in higher education plus some connections he'd made as an intern into a role as an assistant residence hall director at a small Lutheran university in the suburbs – featured intrigue, humor, and undergrad tomfoolery, while Tim's stories featured depressing regulars and snobs critiquing the murkiness of the Woody Haze Double-IPA.

Desmond could lapse into awestruck monologues about his girlfriend, Irie, with whom he'd shared a genuine rom-com meet-cute at a little independent bookstore downtown, while Tim's romantic life brought him only an intriguing-but-impossible crush on a waitress and one sham date with a fake MySpace profile scheme which resulted in his unrequited IM preenings splashed across the top thread on the SomethingAwful forums for a week. Desmond was engaged by, knocked on doors for, and believed in the new president-elect from Illinois, while Tim forgot to vote, so exhausted and hungover at the end of a ten-hour Monday night shift at the brewery that he forgot to leave his house on election day. Tim couldn't seem to stop from spiraling into cyclical self pity whenever he got on the subject of his life, either, and Desmond would do what he could to change the subject back to the game at hand.

They could talk about the Crew. They could talk about the mercurial form of their young goal-scoring forward from Venezuela, their veteran midfielder from Argentina, and the draft picks of the past few seasons that had developed into solid defensive and midfield contributors. They could debate which players might be called-up to the United States national team for the upcoming World Cup qualifying slate in the following year. They could list out the Fire's roster

from goalkeeper to striker and dictate which of their guys would nullify the strengths of the Fire's best and exploit the weaknesses of the Fire's worst. Tim predicted a 3-0 Crew domination, while Desmond was more measured in predicting a 2-1 win.

"We're gonna give up a goal to Dirk Dayne," Desmond said. "He just always gets us." Desmond took a final swig from his can of beer, placed it on the asphalt in front of him, and slammed down his boot to smash it into a clumsy but mostly-flat disc. "I think we'll hold him to one, though."

Tim finished his beer at the same time and crushed it in his hand, the silver rims of the can's top and bottom bowing out on both ends. "I bet he gets sent off before halftime. He hasn't scored since August, he can't score anywhere but here, and he's such a hot-head that he's gonna lose control of himself when our center-backs suffocate him, keep him from getting anything going. He'll probably try to go all Zidane on Chad Marshall when he realizes he can't get what he wants." Tim took a drag off the cigarette in his other hand and mimicked the Frenchman's infamous headbutt from the World Cup final two years prior. "The guy's a total headcase just waiting to blow up."

He dropped his can into the pile of discarded Yuenglings they'd accrued over the prior two hours in wait, now composed of five of Tim's bent cylinders to two of Desmond's discs.

"Moving slow today, huh, Des?"

Desmond pulled a new can out of the maroon-and-gold cardboard case between them. "Just pacing myself. I'll probably stop at four or five if you wanna keep going after your next one."

Tim shrugged and pulled out a can of his own, pulling the tab off and stabbing the can's top with the end of the Buckeye State Brewery bottle opener on his keyring. He held his pack of American Spirits out to Desmond as well, who waved it away.

Dirk Dayne had not been stopped, nor suffocated, nor had he blown up and received a red card at any point. What the Fire's streaky center-forward had done was save his team from certain defeat, scoring two clutch goals, one in the 63rd minute and another in the 70th, to eliminate the two-goal lead that Columbus had built up in the first half. Within that seven minute span, the mood of the Crew supporters in the Northeast corner diminished from ecstasy to white-knuckled angst.

"I can't believe it's happening again, Tim," said Desmond, putting his elbows on the concrete barrier and burying his face in his palms. "Dirk fucking Dayne."

As each minute ticked closer to the end of regulation in the 90th, their unease further calcified. It was clear to everyone in the stadium, be they in yellow or red, that the momentum was behind Chicago. The ESPN commentators could feel it, both coaches acted it out, and the noise from the crowd cemented it. The Crew supporters, who had sung full-throatedly through the game's opening two-thirds, were carried by the frantic, nearly-hoarse yelping of Crew Jesus and a pitiable smattering of desperate fans standing behind him. The traveling Chicago fans in the opposite deck drowned them out, singing, on repeat, for at that point, seventeen minutes, a custom song to the tune of Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It."

Dirk Dayne Owns Columbus

Hey! He Still Owns Columbus

Dirk Dayne Owns Columbus

Fuck The Crew!

Tim first learned of Dirk Dayne as a sophomore in high school. Tim, standing 5'10" and weighing all of 160 pounds, played center back for the Evanston Township High School soccer team. In the first round of the Illinois High School Athletics Association Super-Sectional Playoffs, they matched up with Naperville North High School, who entered the postseason undefeated thanks to the efforts of Dirk, a senior striker, already committed to play for Notre Dame, who stood nearly a half foot taller than Tim. Dirk's team won that game by six goals to zero, four of which were scored by Dirk, three of them by out-jumping and out-muscling Tim for free headers. Tim insisted in vain that Dirk had pushed off of his shoulders for each of them. A photo of one of these goals, featuring Tim's face, situated just about at the level of Dirk's ribcage, looking upward in absolute terror, was printed on the sports page of the *Evanston Review*, an image routinely taped to Tim's locker by all manners of fellow student over the remainder of his time in high school.

When Tim and the rest of the Fourth Floor Hooligans traveled to South Bend, Indiana to support the Buckeyes against the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame in the regional final of the NCAA Tournament, it was Dirk who scored the overtime match-winner, ran over to Tim's traveling contingent clad in scarlet and gray, and saluted them with a point beneath his belt. The following year, when the same regional final was hosted in Columbus, Dirk scored twice and assisted on another goal to, again, knock the Buckeyes out of the tournament. When they got back to the dorm, Desmond and Tim printed out a JPEG of his face from the Notre Dame athletics website and burnt it in effigy, setting off a smoke detector. They were both written up by their RA.

Tim watched Dirk get drafted by the Fire in the fourth round of the 2004 MLS SuperDraft via a laggy webcast feed, and argued to the denizens of the BigSoccer.com forums that his scoring form in college could not possibly translate to the speed and skill of top-division soccer. He was correct in the case of about ten of Chicago's eleven league opponents, Columbus being the lone exception. He averaged .26 goals per game against everybody else, but 1.2 goals per game against the Crew. "He's an otherwise mediocre player with a vendetta against one city," read the game preview in the Columbus Dispatch, "and unfortunately, that city is ours."

"We just need one, Des." Tim finished off the Budweiser tall boy he'd bought from a concession kiosk at halftime and discarded it at his feet. "Just one, that's it. They're overly aggressive, it's late, and they're getting tired. They'll overexert themselves in the attack, we'll get them on the counter and slip one in to send us to Los Angeles for the cup final. We need one."

Desmond looked at the ground in front of him and shook his head. The Fire goalkeeper stepped into his free-kick, accompanied by a half-hearted "You Fat Bastard!" call from the nervous Crew fans. Chicago won the ball in the midfield and gradually worked it up toward the opposing goal.

Tim felt himself re-experiencing each postseason failure he'd seen in the preceding six years – all of the late-game chokes, the penalty shootout losses, and tried to push them aside. Something haunted that stadium. Painful recollections of past devastation flooded back into Tim's subconscious. He tried to tamp them back down and let himself believe the Crew would come through, but the fog from the alcohol and nerves of the fans around him reduced his capacity to push back the impending anxieties. He kept finding himself in disappointed contexts –

He was just a few rows back to see the Crew choke away a lead in the 2005 playoffs. He only had to turn his head a little to see exactly the seat in which he sat when they lost in 2003. The jersey on his chest was the same one he'd wore in the upper deck of RFK Stadium in Washington as they lost to D.C. United after a grueling road trip upon which his Volvo twice overheated somewhere deep in southwestern Pennsylvania. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his black Adidas track jacket, the same one whose sleeves he'd used to dry the tears from his eyes the night that the girlfriend he'd met in a sophomore year English class told him she wouldn't keep their relationship going long-distance when she moved back to Texas from Ohio after graduation.

This was the sixteenth game he'd attended in 2008 – he knew because he still tacked each ticket stub to a corkboard on his bedroom wall like he had in college – eleven of them had been wins, eleven more than he'd been privy to in most other contexts of his life that year. The stadium had been a place of rare joy for him that year – he couldn't let himself believe in the prospect of it becoming a place of pain once again.

“We're gonna get one back,” Tim said again. “We just need one.”

The Fire continued their forward progress with agonizing, unpretentious efficiency. Every ground pass seemed to narrowly miss the outstretched boot of a Crew defender and keep the hopes of the Chicago comeback alive. Tim grew more and more tense with each meter covered. His fingers curled into tight fists, and he dug his knuckles into the concrete at his waist. He tried not to focus on Dirk Dayne, whose eyes were on the ball, waiting for only the most singular moment in which he could make his move for the perfect pass to slot home. He gave off an air of unshakable arrogance, as if he knew that he stood to break a whole city's worth of hearts with just the swing of his leg. With each darting step he took, the Columbus center back tasked with

defending him reacted, desperate to delay the inevitable . Dirk's visage morphed into an arrogant smirk every time he faked out the frantic defender.

A Crew player finally got a touch on a pass, only to direct the ball out for a corner-kick.

Desmond nudged Tim again. "If it's gonna happen, it's gonna be now."

Tim couldn't find the words to play Pangloss anymore. He leaned up on his fists and braced for whatever came next.

The Fire midfielder hit it perfectly, lofting the ball just into the middle of the box, right in front of the mouth of the goal, far out enough that the goalie couldn't get out there but near enough that Dirk could position himself for it.

Dirk backpedaled to meet the arc of the cross. The Crew defender stuck as close to him as possible and tried to jump at exactly the same moment, hoping if not to get to the ball first, then at least to mess up Dirk's shot enough for the keeper to have a better chance at it.

At that moment, with the ball hanging in the air, Tim fixated on the enemy striker with an intensity he could only seem to muster for that which he hated. He watched Dirk place his hands on the defender's shoulders, propel himself upwards, and meet the ball in midflight with his head. It ricocheted off towards the goal. The Crew goalkeeper leapt at the shot, but it passed his extended fingers by at least a foot and shook the back of the net.

Tim's eyes darted to the referee, in futile hope he might've called Dirk's push-off, which had left the defender on the ground in played-up pain, a foul. He hadn't. His hand extended towards the middle line, signaling a goal - surely the match-winner - for Chicago.

Dirk didn't even watch it go in. As soon as he hit in, he broke out towards the corner flag nearest Tim and the rest of the Crew's support, raising a finger and pointing towards the crowd. He smirked and nodded, repeating something verbally that became clearer as he neared Tim in

the stands: “I got you guys again!” When he got within five yards, he hinged his elbow and mimicked the same vulgar gesture that Tim had been privy to as a college student five years prior. With the other hand, he waved towards himself, as if inviting more of the shower of jeers and boos that had sprung up from the crowd.

Something of a dam burst at the bottom of Tim’s spine, sending charges of pent-up rage to his brain and a hot numbness across his extremities. The instincts prompting the actions that typically followed the sight of, a late-match collapse, in which he’d bury his face in his hands and go quiet, were drowned out by a pure, bone-deep fury, one which he couldn’t have put words to in the moment, one which he couldn’t understand in the moment, one which propelled him physically up and over the barrier separating him from Dirk Dayne.

He felt a slight tug at his right jacket sleeve from behind him, but not enough to hold him back. It only took him two steps; the grass beneath his feet was perfectly soft and unimpeding. Dirk didn’t seem to notice him. Somewhere deep within his brain sprung the muscle memory instilled in him in the eighth grade when his father taught him how to throw punches at the kids who bullied him in gym class. He planted both of his feet, ensured that his thumb was held outside the curled fingers, pulled back, and threw his fist with absolute precision into his foil’s sneer.

He made point-blank, perfect contact. Blood immediately smashed out of Dirk’s mouth and he fell right to the ground – legitimately, not in the performed manner Tim had seen so many times before from players trying to draw fouls. The sound, a dull thud, that Dirk’s body made as it hit the ground brought Tim back to lucidity. He seemed to process everything at once: the gasps and horrified yelps of the crowd behind him intercut with the voice he recognized as Desmond’s pleading with him to get back, accompanied by the hand again grabbing at his jacket

to try to pull him away from the field. Crimson defined the first lucid images he could process once he stopped metaphysically seeing red, an irony he figured the English professors who regularly patronized him would find delicious, first the growing splotch of it across Dirk's face – accompanied a disoriented, nearly lifeless expression on his face, one bereft of smarm or arrogance and therefore completely foreign to Tim. Secondly, he identified the group of furious players in red Chicago uniforms rushing directly at him.

The scope and stakes of what he'd just done became very clear to him in those seconds, as well as the ensuing punishment, as well as the recognition that he deserved what was coming to him. He didn't even try to run. A Fire player dive-tackled him to the grass beneath. Tim recognized the man's fist raised to the sky and the speed with which it came down before pain exploded from his eye socket. His vision was overcome with splotches of bright white and the commotion of several other players trying to get to him. He felt more blows connect with him, to his chest, neck, and stomach. The weight of the first Fire player left his chest. Tim looked up through the haze of stars and made out the flash of a police badge before feeling himself turned over and his hands cuffed together.

With his head held against the ground, he couldn't make out nearly anything past the front row of supporters, most of whom were either staring in disbelief or trying not to look. He scanned across the front row until he made out the gap where he had once stood, with Desmond next to it with his mouth agape and his head shaking. Out of the confused din of the supporter's section, Tim could identify a song, one led by Crew Jesus and picked up by a scant few.

"Columbus 'Til I Die!"

Columbus 'Til I Die!"

Columbus, Columbus, Columbus 'Til I Die!"