

*“All I’m saying is, there’s a reason why Sporty Spice is the only one without a fella.”*

*-Bend It Like Beckham, 2002*

The first rule of soccer is no hands. It’s one of the only rules. It’s the primary thing everybody knows about the game. But the rule extends from there; hands are a no, forearms are a no, elbows are a no, biceps are a no, deltoids— those are up to a ref’s discretion. But, what a lot of people don’t know is that even accidents can be fouls. If your arm is up, contorted in some unnatural position, and the ball hits it, that’s a foul, no matter how strongly you plead your case. You touched that ball. You were in the goal box. The other team can score and it’s your fault.

There are no hands in soccer. Zip. Nada. None.

We were in the girl’s green room during rehearsal. We were supposed to be getting fit for costumes, but none of the costumes were ready yet. Everyone was angry, but I can’t remember exactly what we were angry about, only that there was a general miasma of discontent and hostility floating throughout the theater. I was sitting in front of a mirror. Everyone was. All of the walls were mirrors, the vanity kind with exposed lightbulbs encircling their frames. I was talking to some of the other girls, practicing lines for the play, and brushing various powders over my cheekbones. Charlotte was complaining about something, which she did often, and I remember her saying something about an email the director had sent out. Email? What email?

Then I said, “There was an email?”

And she said, “God, if you were a man, I would hate you.”

It felt like the wind was knocked out of me. I was taken so aback that I think I forgot to speak at that moment, and while I may be able to write a quip without so much as looking at my eraser, it's also so hard to say some witty comeback in person. And what type of comeback do you say to a comment like that? So I stopped talking and just listened to Charlotte speak with everyone else. I picked up the makeup brush that sat on the lip of the vanity, rolled it around in my fingers, and brushed swaths of pink onto the hollows of my cheeks. I ran my fingers through my hair and over my skin, looking for something to do with my hands. After a while, though, I gave up trying to keep myself busy and just looked at myself in the mirror.

On April, 2nd, 1982, Argentinian forces invaded the British Falkland Islands, spawning one of the largest UK military actions since World War Two. The battle was brief but bloody. After 72 days, Argentina surrendered.

On June 22nd, 1986, Diego Maradona, one of (if not *the*) best soccer players of all time punched a soccer ball into the goal. Literally. Punched it. With one hand raised in preemptive victory, fingers balled into a fist, Maradona hit the ball past the keeper, and it landed defiantly in the center of the net.

It was the quarter-final World Cup match and tensions were high. A previous England coach had called the Argentinian players "animals." A fistfight between fans had broken out in the stadium minutes before the game.

In came Maradona, with a killer left jab. Argentina won the game and won the World Cup that year.

Maradona would go on to say: "I don't talk about politics [...] No, no, no. I play football. No politics."

I don't know about that, Diego.

“I just don't get it. When he gets mad, it's justified. When I get mad, suddenly everyone's involved and it's this big thing. It's just because I'm a woman, for real.”

“That was very Gloria Steinem of you.”

She paused. “Who?”

I think the inauthenticity of Charlotte's words was what hurt me the most. Even the way she said it was inauthentic. “If you were a man, I would hate you.” She smiled big and chuckled as she quipped about hating me. There was something sinister in the sardonic lilt of her tone and the suggestive vocal fry she punctuated the sentence with, eyes darting to the others as she chuckled, beckoning them to chuckle along themselves. *If you were a man I would hate you.* As if the only thing stopping her from hating me was The Sisterhood, that elusive telepathic contract all women are taught that states: *Even the worst woman is better than a man.* But she already did hate me, and I'm not a man. The Sisterhood had nothing to do with it.

The thing is, I could have accepted Charlotte's random dislike of me if she had been honest about it. I'd have been happier if she looked at me point blank and said “I hate you.” I'd have liked it better if she had said “I hate you,” and spit on my shoes, but she didn't do that, did she? Women can't just be mean to each other out in the open, we can't get into tricky little fistfights or spars. We have to be sneaky about it. Controlled and Collected. Men can hit each other, we can't. We're backhanded. Overhand. Catty. Bitchy. Men already hate us, we already hate ourselves; other women are off-limits. Off-limits unless you can hide it. Off-limits unless you can lie.

No hands is an easy rule. And, to be completely honest, most of the rules in soccer are self-explanatory.

There's this one, though, that gets even the best of us.

Let's say a player is attacking. He's dribbling the ball across the half line, clenching in on the opposing team's goal. Across the field, left-wing, he sees his teammate, arm raised, calling "ball, ball!" His teammate is unmanned and completely open, so the player decides to make an expert pass, the ball's thirty-two panels oscillating wildly as it zig-zags over the pitch. The teammate receives the ball. The goal is in sight. The whistle blows. *The whistle blows.*

Fuck. Offsides.

"Oh my God."

"What?"

"They just overturned Roe v. Wade."

She paused. "What's that?"

Clive Thomas refereed when West Ham United played Ipswich Town in the 1975 FA Cup semi-final. West Ham won two-nil, much to the chagrin of Ipswich supporters, who were up in arms and ready to swing over two disallowed goals.

Law Eleven: A player in an offside position at the moment the ball is played or touched by a team-mate is only penalized on becoming involved in active play.

It's a fickle rule. The player must be in front of the last defender, the goal line, and the ball in order to score. The player's arms aren't included in this rule, but the feet, legs, head, and

torso are. It's not illegal to be in an offside position, but if someone passes a ball to a player who's offside, the whistle is blown. If a player dribbles past the last defender himself, the ref stays silent. Different officiates will call different plays offsides. Any soccer player who's had her share of time on the pitch will know generally when an offside call will happen, but even the best Premier League players can never precisely know if they'll get called on it. And, as a result, they'll never precisely know if the call was a true one.

The game was a replay. West Ham and Ipswich had already played once and tied. Bryan Hamilton scored what some remember to be a perfectly good goal, a goal that would've evened the score and, quite literally, evened the playing field. Thomas called offsides. Then it happened again. Hamilton scored, Thomas disallowed. Once is a pity, twice is an affront to any respectable English football fan. To this day, nearly half a decade later, Ipswich fans believe the game was robbed, that they could've played in the final game against Fulham and potentially gone on to be the winners of Wembley. The call was notorious. West Ham ended up winning the final, too

Bizarrely, Thomas called the foul on his own, without his assistant ref flagging down any of the players. Some recall that Thomas wasn't even in a position where he could see Hamilton's strike. Even so, he made the call.

So, did Thomas simply decide the play was offside? Was it the truth? Or did he just want to start some shit? I don't know. You tell me.

Mick Mills said about the Ipswich match: "1975 hurt a lot of people [...] we should have won the cup and we never even got to the final." That team, the 1974–1975 team, was one of the best in Ipswich history. Nobody disputed that or can dispute that. Without Thomas's call, they most likely would have won the game and had a pretty good shot at the whole cup.

It wasn't disheartening that the team got so far and didn't win. What was disheartening was the fact that they were given the illusion of another chance at victory and Clive Thomas shut it down. Because of offsides. And really, nobody knows what offsides is anyway.

I remember this one day when my friend was driving us to get ice cream or coffee or something like that. It was six o'clock, and the Nevada sun was blaring bright through the untinted glass of their Volkswagon windshield. I remember saying something like, "Oh, I need to put some sunscreen on my hands," because the UV index was probably something like fifteen, and my friend said, "I don't. I'm going to have *soooooo* many wrinkles when I'm older." They said it with pride. *You want to keep your soft, supple, smooth skin for as long as possible? Oh, honey. I'll be aging gracefully, thank you very much.* They had perfect skin. No acne or scars or pockmarks like I do.

I remember looking at my hands, smooth and plump and young, and thinking about my mom, who to this day complains about her crepe skin. Old Lady Hands, she calls them.

Another friend said to me that she hoped she'd be fat when she was older. She was tiny and pretty, with caramel skin and a face like a pixie. She told me that she wanted to be two hundred and seventy pounds, even though she was only maybe four foot nine. I asked why. She shrugged. *I'm just cool like that.*

And I thought about my mom again. All my life I've heard her talk about what diet she was on and how fat she was and how much junk she ate and just how sad she was with her body. And I think about my twenty-six-inch waist seeming so big in comparison to that little girl who wants to be fat.

My question is, do those girls actually want to look like that? Or are they just saying that so they can be interesting and unique and so they can have a different perspective? Just so that they can look down on the girls who are reapplying their mascara in the bathroom mirror before class. Or the girls who curl their hair every day and wear pink bows on the ends of their Anne Shirley braids? Seems like a one-step-forward, ten-step-back situation to me. Ladies, is it feminist to want to be unattractive?

Is it feminist to be inauthentic?

I can say with absolute certainty that I want to be beautiful. I want to be attractive. I want attention from men. I want to appear to the world as it wishes to see me. Does that mean I'm not a feminist?

I guess it's cool to want to be ugly as long as you're beautiful to begin with.

“*Say Hello to our first woman president.*’ Well, that aged badly.”

“Hillary or Kamala?”

She paused. “Does it matter?”

Roy Keane was a Premier League soccer player for twelve years. 1993–2005. In that time, he won two hundred and twenty-nine games, scored thirty-nine goals, had a one hundred percent tackle success rate, and was kicked off the field thirteen times.

He had sixty-nine yellow cards and seven red ones.

When Keane was on the field, he threw punches, jabbed knees, kicked other players in the genitals, head-butted, screamed, and walked off the field bloody. He left it all out there. Who

can say what “it” was, but he put it on the pitch. He got to go out there, expecting to fuck shit up and then fucked shit up, and nobody was surprised.

And it didn’t take much. A goal celebration— knee to the groin. An ill-timed quip towards the Keano— fisticuffs. He would get set off by unimportant things, said by unimportant people, and make it into something big. He made Kilaminjaros out of anthills. Anthills that were already too big to begin with.

Keane existed in a kingdom of sweat and dirt and grass. And he ruled, hard and steadfast, with an iron cleat.

When I’m angry with someone, I imagine ripping their head off with my bare hands. I imagine the sound of their flesh ripping, their hair-tearing, the blood spurting from their now exposed carotid artery. I imagine tearing off their ears and nose and cartilage with my teeth. I imagine stabbing out their eyes with my nails. I imagine their body lying there, still and cold, while I walk away happy.

Except, I don’t have the nerve. I don’t live in a world where it’s normal or acceptable for women to resort to violence. So I have to imagine it all in my head and just agree and proceed, or gossip and proceed.

Like, sometimes I just wanna punch a bitch. Is that too much to ask?

Everybody’s wearing *Sambas* now. Those narrow Adidas shoes with the suede C on the toe and the huge tongue. I started seeing all these other girls start wearing them and I asked, “Oh, do you play?” because *Sambas* were the original indoor soccer shoes and I’ve seen people wear them since I was playing Tiny-Tots. They looked at me weird. *No*, said their eyes and

occasionally, if they felt like being honest, their mouths. *We wear these 'cause they're fun and trendy.*

So I'm wondering if I'm getting back into soccer now because other women are wearing Adidas shoes and track pants are back in style and all the sporty girls are having a resurgence or if I just miss it.

I stopped playing competitive soccer just before I turned fifteen because my teammates were insufferable and they made me nervous because I was a deeply shy and scared girl.

I went to play for this one team that needed an extra defender. They let me play in the game without trying out because I was pretty good at the time and a previous coach had sent word about me. I stayed on the bench for the first half before the coach called me up to the sideline. He waved down the ref, motioned for a sub, and sent me in.

I ran in and asked the girl I was switching with for her name. She looked at me and rolled her eyes like I somehow offended her by simply being polite. I don't remember what her name was, but I do remember half-time when she screamed at the coach for subbing her off and quit the team on the spot.

She was best friends with the captain.

I never felt comfortable playing on a team of girls like that. I mean, I felt OK when I was playing, when I was on the field, running around in my grimy, sweat-chalked shin guards, but the second I had to talk to any of the other girls, or even be around them at all, I was ill at ease. The constant competition, with girls who were supposed to lift me up, who I was supposed to lift up too, it was exhausting. And I never felt happier than when I quit. Not because I didn't want to play soccer anymore, but because I'd never have to see those girls ever again.

And I just think sometimes that, *if* I would have been a bit more personable, *if* I fit in with the other girls on that team, *if* that other girl hadn't quit, I might still be playing. But I'm not. Because those girls were never going to be on my team. I was never going to be on theirs. We all worked together, but some girls were always stronger. Some girls were always faster. Some girls were always more talented or prettier or more popular, and that was expected. It's not enough to be fighting against the other team, you also have to fight with your own teammates. And it's never-ending.

I still like playing soccer, but only casually, without all the contention. Because I love it. I love the game. I love the culture the jerseys and the smell of my cleats digging into wet grass as I hammer the ball across the field. But having to make sure that I'm not being called offsides on a play that my teammate set me up for, I'm sick and tired of that.

"So are you a feminist?"

"Huh?"

"It's just, the book you're reading, it says it's a feminist novel."

"Oh."

"So, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"A feminist."

She paused. "No...no, I'm not."