

It's almost the end of the school day and once again Miss Dina explains some equations on the blackboard.

Numbers race through my mind all the time. Whether it is adding up goals scored in a soccer match, subtracting chores from my list, multiplying my allowance, or dividing the pizza, I love numbers!

I love them so much that Miss Dina's equations get quickly absorbed in my memory bank and now my mind is free to wander.

I picture myself in a soccer game as I stare through the window.

My teammate passes to me. I go on the attack, dribbling as fast as I can, I move towards the goal. Half-way down the field, the defense comes to meet me. I do a give-and-go, pass to my left wing pulling away from the three attackers. I sprint past the defenders, closing in on the goal, my right foot poised for the perfect kick...

"Rafael... Rafael... RAFAEL!"

"POOF!" goes my soccer daydream.

"How do I find the X value?" Miss Dina asks, positioning herself in front of me. The other kids giggle a little.

I look at the blackboard, at least it's an easy one.

"Isolate 'x' on one side of the equation and divide the number that appears on the same side of the equation as part of 'x,'" I answer, coming to my senses.

"Well done!" Miss Dina replies.

I look at the clock and there are only eight minutes left of class. I can't wait to play soccer after school, but Miss Dina is still helping some of the students with their calculations.

She hasn't even handed out homework sheets. "We may go over time, which means I won't have enough time to play before I have to get home for dinner!" I groan inside.

"May I hand out homework, Miss Dina?" I ask eagerly.

Miss Dina looks at me surprised by the offer and says "Sure! The stack is on my desk."

"Let me have half," Gus demands with his hand open.

Gus is my best friend and we've been on the same soccer team since second grade. He knows it's urgent. "Maybe we can beat the others to the soccer field," he plans.

I give him half the stack, lick my index finger, and start distributing homework while the kids gather their books, pencils, and lunchboxes.

"Done!" we say together, placing the leftover sheets on her desk.

Next, we swiftly scoop our backpacks off the floor onto our backs and run out the door, barely able to hear "Thank yooooouuu!" from Miss Dina.

We speed down the stairs, pass the cafeteria just to run into a group of kids with arms crossed standing in front of the field. It's closed!

"When did this happen?" I ask. "We were playing here just an hour earlier."

"I guess you will have to wait to lose to us later," Max says sarcastically, while the rest of the crowd laughs with high-fives all around.

"Just ignore him," Gus advises, walking towards the exit. "Deep inside, he is just insecure," he adds, sounding very mature for his age.

Gus is the kind of kid who gets along with everybody. But he does not waste time with punks, and Max is that ... a punk. Always eager to play, but he's just a ball hog.

"Well, guess I'll just head home," I sigh, saddened at the lost opportunity to play a match before dinner.

"We can still play," I hear Gus say as he heads towards the bike racks. "We just need to find a new place."

"Where will we find a place to play without a team?" I ask, following him.

"You know that big park north of our neighborhood? That has a soccer field."

"I have no idea how long it's going to take to get there. And we don't even have a team!"

I say.

"But you can figure it out, can't you? You're Miss Dina's best student, after all. And don't worry about the team, I'm sure we'll figure something out by the time we get there."

As I consider it, numbers start rushing through my head.

I write those down and start building my equations.

"Fifteen minutes. That's about what it will take us to bike the six blocks and reach the park," I estimate.

I climb on the back of Gus's bike and we set off on our adventure. If we hurry, we can at least get a game in before we have to be home for dinner.

We ride at a good pace for the first two blocks but then remember we need to call our moms to let them know we are going to play soccer before heading home. So, we stop at the phone booth on the corner to make our calls. Once Gus is done, he hops back on his bike riding in circles as he waits for me.

"Yes, I'll be careful." "Yes, I'll be home before dark." "Yes, Gus is with me." "No, I won't get in any trouble." "Okay, Okay." "Bye, mom!"

I hang up and start walking away when out of nowhere two taller, stronger boys approach me with big nasty smiles.

"Hey kid, I like that watch," says the taller one. "Looks just like the one I lost last week.

Why don't you do me a favor and give it to me? It's my birthday."

"Yeah. It's his birthday!" echoes the other.

"But this is my watch," I reply, startled by his claim.

"You got it wrong, kid. It's his birthday, and that's his present. From you." the shorter adds as he steps closer, staring me down.

As they move in, I see Gus in my peripheral vision, speeding toward us on his bike and I realize: he's got a plan!

"JERONIMOOOOOO!!!!!" I hear him yell as he speeds through us, pushing the boys away, giving me the perfect opportunity to hop on the back and get out of there, pronto.

"You're welcome," Gus says once he can take a breath.

I pat him on the shoulder, recognizing he had just saved me from big trouble. I look behind and confirm those troublemakers are out of sight.

"Oh man, I bet we're way off track now," Gus laments.

I check my watch. "We're still on track. The time we lost making calls was made up by you speeding out of there," I celebrate. "Ten more minutes and we will be playing soccer!"

We are now entering the third block. As we go over the gravel path, there's a "puh-fissss" and all of a sudden we slow down ... a lot.

"Did you have a big meal earlier?" Gus asks me, putting extra effort into peddling.

"That wasn't me! Did you not have enough for lunch?" I counter, thinking Gus had gotten tired.

But once we hit a big bump on the path, our butts tell us something is very wrong.

I look at the back wheel. "Oh man! We have a flat!" I wail. "This is going to set us back big time."

We get off the bike and start pushing it, not sure what to do next.

"How could we possibly get to the field at a reasonable time with a flat tire?" I cry.

"We could take turns pushing the bike, but even then, this will delay us a lot." Gus admits.

Between complaining that it is hot and how we are hungry, we keep pushing as fast as we can.

"Stay off the gravel. Go down the dirt road, it's much faster." I hear someone say behind us.

It's Dani and Julia from school, riding their bicycles up to us.

"We ride this way every day. If you go down the gravel road you just end up popping your tires," Dani explains with a sly grin.

"Wanna try patching it?" Julia offers, as she points to the tire.

Gus and I nod, "Yes. please." We cry in unison.

Julia pulls a kit out of her backpack, along with a tool and a hand air pump and we get to work.

"Gus, can you help me prop the bike upside-down? Gus? Gus!" I cry.

"Huh? Oh! Right," he finally replies, amazed by Julia's skills.

We prop the bike up and she proceeds to remove the tire and work on patching the tire.

"Where are you headed?" Julia asks.

"To the big park, about three blocks from here," I say. "We're going to play soccer, but we're running out of time at this rate."

"We've tried playing there, but the boys never let us. They say we'll make them lose,"

Dani explains with a sneer. "But they don't know. We could take them. Right, Julia?"

"Maybe we can build our own team," Gus offers, excited, remembering we need a team once we get there.

"REALLY?!" they both ask.

"Yeah," Gus and I nod.

With the patch firmly in place, I now pump up the tire for the final test, and—Voilà!—the tire is full again. We hurry on with our new teammates. Now we are four.

Ahead of us, the main path is blocked in preparation for a music festival starting that evening.

"Oh man! Another delay?!" I lament, thinking of my initial estimates. We only have seven minutes left before it's too late to play a full game.

Julia points to an empty lot nearby. "Hey, let's take a detour and cut across the empty lot."

"It's a little shady, but it will definitely save us time," Dani says, with the confidence of someone who's done it before.

"Okay, but it better be safe," I say, hearing my mom's voice in my head.

As we pass the fence, there's overgrown grass and dead trees everywhere. It's the perfect setting for a horror movie, I think to myself, not letting the others know I'm worried.

"Why does it feel like we should not be here?" Gus mumbles, looking around suspiciously.

And just before anyone could answer that...

"GRRRRRRRR!" A growling, nasty, shaggy dog appears from behind the bushes and his snarl tells us he's not asking for belly rubs.

"AHHHHHHHHH!" we all scream in unison.

As we turn to run away, we hear angry barking coming from behind us. Another dog! Now we really are in trouble.

Through the grass a giant, rugged dog rushes towards the shaggy dog. It stops with a huge bark positioning himself between us and the shaggy dog. Realizing it is no match for the rugged one, the shaggy dog makes a run for it.

"Troy! Troy!! Troy!!!" three kids shout as they burst through the trees. **"Come back!!"** they yell.

Troy, the rugged dog, stops and turns around, looking very pleased as he trots towards the kids.

"Is that your dog? Troy is our hero!" Dani cries in relief as she pats Troy's head in appreciation for him chasing away the shaggy, monster.

"Good boy!" Julia croons. Troy seems very happy with all the attention.

"Sorry about that. I'm Renato. This is my brother, Gabriel, and my sister, Fernanda. We opened our gate to go to the park and Troy didn't want to stay behind."

"Don't be sorry. Troy just saved our bacon!" Gus exclaims.

"Yeah, he is our lucky charm," Fernanda says proudly. **"Somehow he always gets us out of trouble."**

"What park are you heading to?" I ask.

"The large park north of here. We like to go there and play soccer before dinner sometimes," Gabriel replies.

"Us too!" the four of us say together.

"We've been going there every day, hoping to recruit more players to form a team but every time all the players are already on teams," Renato explains. "It stinks!"

"We can form a team. Seven would be perfect for that size field," says Dani.

"That would be great," I reply. "By the way, I'm Rafael. These are my friends: Gus, Dani and Julia. What do you say? Want to team up?"

Renato, Gabriel and Fernanda look at each other and grin. "Of course!"

"Alright! We better hurry before we have to head back home," Julia warns.

Renato and Fernanda ride their bicycles while Gabriel rides his scooter, powered by Troy pulling him.

"We only have two more blocks to go or about five minutes," I yell to the group over the wind.

"That's if we don't run into any more roadblocks," Gus lets out.

"I don't think we have to worry. We have our lucky charm with us," Fernanda reminds us.

Troy leads us the rest of the way and we get to the field just in time to play a game. But who's there? Max and his friends from school. No wonder everyone had trouble playing.

"You can't play here!" Max declares. "We've already got a team."

"That's okay. We have our own team." I say, as we all pose for dramatic effect.

"Fine. Let's do this Rafa-smell!"

His insult makes me so mad my fists begin to clench, then Gus reminds me, "He's just a punk. Shake it off." he adds.

Gus suggests a coin toss to decide who goes first but is interrupted by Max's taunt:

"You can have the kickoff. Losers go first."

I take a deep breath, ignoring him and shaking out my hands.

The teams get ready. The whistle blows "Tweeeeeeeet!!"

"Let's go, team," I rally, kicking the game off.

I move fast, passing the defense, approaching their goal, then...

"Ahaaa!" Max celebrates, stealing the ball, running full force forward.

Before we can react, Max's team scores, less than two minutes into the game.

"Goaaaaaaaaaallllll!" they rejoice, gesturing in an exaggerated manner at us.

"We got this, team. They just got lucky with the head start," Gus justifies, trying to cheer the team up.

They kick off again and our defense pushes forward, but their offense keeps control.

They advance aggressively and make many more goal attempts, just to be blocked by Renato's long arms.

Our team presses hard. Their team fights back. Back and forth! On and on for the entire match.

"We have less than five minutes left," Dani cries. We had lost track of time.

"Looks like you really are losers!" mocks Max.

"We'll show you!!!" Julia yells, charging forward and unexpectedly stealing the ball from the midfield.

Caught off guard, their team desperately goes on defense, blocking Julia.

"I'm open!!!" Gabriel calls to Julia, positioning himself perfectly to receive a pass.

Their defense is ready to block when Julia surprises them with a sudden pass to Fernanda who happens to be wide open.

Fernanda speeds ahead and I follow.

She makes eye contact. Passes to me. I go on the attack. Dribbling as fast as I can, I move towards the goal. Half-way down the field, the defense comes at me. I do a give-and-go, passing to Dani who is pulling away from the three of them. I sprint past the defense, closing in on the goal, my right foot poised for the perfect kick. Dani makes the perfect pass, and out of the air I make contact. WHAM!

"GOAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLLL!!!!!!!" we all cry joyfully, celebrating our first goal, just before the final "Tweeeeeeeet!"

The game is over. It's a tie. And we feel like champions.

"Good game." I say to Max.

"That was a good move. But don't expect it to work again," he returns. "Maybe we let you play again tomorrow, Rafa-sm... Rafael."

We all turn to head home. Back through the empty lot, dropping off Renato, Gabriel, and Fernanda. "See you tomorrow? With Troy?" I ask.

"Absolutely!" says Renato.

"We'll beat them next time." adds Gabriel.

"We know their weakness." Fernanda agrees.

"BYE!" Says the rest of the team, as they head home for dinner.

Next, we pass down the dirt and gravel road, recounting the great passing, and amazing footwork before we get to Julia and Dani's house. "See you next time?" I say.

"Tomorrow, after school, right?" confirms Dani.

"I'll bring the bike pump." Julia jabs Gus with her elbow.

"Ow! Yeah, yeah." Gus smiles and we wave good-bye to Dani and Julia.

As we pass down our street, we smell delicious food coming from our houses.

"Looks like we made it just in time." Gus grins.

"Yeah." I smile back. "It was a good day."