



The Euro-Kickers – Hunt for the Ticket-Counterfeiter (Vol. 1)

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THE PROMISE

The city was literally buzzing. The whole of Munich was gripped by European Championship fever. Everywhere you looked there were fans in scarves, caps or football strips, or waving flags. Or all of those at the same time. Kids wore the names and shirt numbers of their favourite players with pride. The atmosphere was great; everyone seemed to be looking forward to the quarter finals, and the German team had got through to play in them – here in Munich! A home game, it was perfect! Kick-off was in just a few days, on Friday 3 July, at 9pm.

Of course, the match was completely sold out.

That's a good thing, the man thought. A very good thing, in fact, at least for him. There were enough fans who were prepared to pay way over the odds for a quarter-final ticket – on the black market. The man smiled to himself. He could help those fans out, because he still had tickets to sell. His treasure was safe in the inside pocket of the jacket he was wearing over an elegant shirt. The tout with the friendly face looked like someone you could trust completely.

His eyes roamed over the square. He was searching for these people who walk around with a sign: *Looking for quarter final tickets!*

That's why he was here, on Karlsplatz in Munich, which the locals call the Stachus. [...]

There was a whole whirl of transport here: below ground in the U-Bahn tunnels, above ground on the streets and the tram lines. As far back as the Middle Ages, the square had been a transport hub, because the salt trading route that was the source of Munich's wealth ran through here. And this square was going to make the black-market trader wealthy today, as well.

The man looked around carefully again – looking for a victim. Sure, he could have sold the tickets online. But that was too risky for him. The police or UEFA would have been able to trace him. Plus, he wanted the money straight away. Cash is king, he thought. An old expression, but it was still true. There was also the fact that his tickets weren't real, but very well-made forgeries. Online there was always the risk that a police officer might pretend to be interested in the tickets. The officers knew that forgeries were on the market, after all.

No, it was safer here on the street. He could pick his own victims. And yes, he could literally smell whether someone was a police officer. His knowledge of human nature had never let him down.

His eyes moved east, past the large fountain to the mighty Karlstor gate, beyond which lay Neuhauser Straße with its countless shops. Shopping, shopping, shopping... but only he had something that was truly valuable to a fan, at least during the Euros: tickets for the quarter finals.

Suddenly his heart began to beat faster. A man was just leaving the burger joint by the fountain. There was a boy at the man's side who must have been eleven or twelve.

Probably father and son, the counterfeiter thought. They looked very similar. Both were wearing Germany football shirts, which was completely normal at that time, and the man was holding a piece of paper in front of him like a knight carrying a shield. "Ticket wanted!" Bingo, thought the conman. I'll be glad to help him out.

He strolled over to the pair. Perfectly calm and relaxed. He didn't want to arouse any suspicion or put too much pressure on by rushing over to them.

Father and son were now standing by the fountain.

The counterfeiter came up to them. "How's it going?" He had quite a strong lisp. "Excited for the Euros?"

"Of course!" the boy cried at once, while his father just nodded.

"But no tickets, right?"

"No, sadly not," the father replied. "I..."

"He promised me one for my birthday, but he was snoozing and left it too late," his son said crossly.

The father gave a tortured smile. "You're exaggerating, Alex. The tickets were all bought up in a few hours."

The boy called Alex folded his arms across his chest. "That's what I'm saying: you were too slow."

His father shrugged guiltily. "I have a stressful job. I can't be looking at the internet all the time."

"Oh, that really is annoying," the counterfeiter said sympathetically. "But as it happens, I might be able to help."

Alex's eyes widened. "Do you mean you have a ticket for me?"

The counterfeiter moved a little closer and lowered his voice to a whisper. "That's right, I do. In fact, I've got two."

The father waved off the suggestion. "No, I'm afraid I don't have the time to go myself. But I'd like to buy one for Alex. How much do you want for it?"

The counterfeiter discreetly showed one of the forged tickets, smiling his friendly smile. "Because it's you, and because it's Alex's birthday, I'll do you a deal: only 700 euros."

"What? That's far too much!" the father cried. But the counterfeiter knew at once that his resistance was weak. This was a good man who had messed up with his son's birthday present and would probably be willing to pay even more in order to keep the promise he'd made.

He shook his head and lisped: "No, it's a snip. You know, at Euro 2016 the category one tickets for the quarter finals were almost 200 euros. And for the final they were just over 900. In any case, I bought my tickets on the – er – open market, and shelled out 700 for them myself."

Of course, he had made that up, but this brazen lie had the intended effect.

Alex looked up at his father. There was an unspoken plea in his eyes, almost a begging look. But because the sum was so high, he clearly didn't dare to pressure him.

"Okay, let's say 500," the father said, trying to haggle.

"No, when I say 700, I mean 700," the counterfeiter shot back. "Believe me, I could easily find another buyer."

A look of panic came into the boy's eyes. He hopped nervously from one foot to the other.

"Alright then, I'll go to the cashpoint just over there," said the father and walked off, while Alex breathed out audibly and balled his hands into fists.

Three minutes later, seven green banknotes changed hands – and one ticket for the quarter final, which was worth no more than the paper it was printed on.

Beaming, Alex pressed the ticket to his heart. "You're the best, Dad."

His father stroked his hair. "You're welcome. I did make you a promise, after all," he murmured, nodding to the counterfeiter. "But now we need to go."

The counterfeiter watched them as they turned into the pedestrian precinct and headed towards Marienplatz.

He smiled once more and strolled off, whistling, towards his red sports car, which he had parked in the Herzog-Wilhelm-Straße underground carpark. His fingers played with the notes in his trouser pocket as he walked. His smile grew broader, and finally he gave a ringing laugh.

100%, ALL THE TIME!

“You’re the biggest lazybones I know!” Coach Bob Müller yelled. He pointed across the training ground at his son Pascal, whom everyone called Paco.

Paco was a very talented forward, but he didn’t enjoy training. And he didn’t get why, in this heat, he had to run panting after a pass that he’d probably never reach. There wasn’t even anything at stake here. It was a little training game, six a side. That was all. So Paco had broken off his sprint.

“Not even Gareth Bale would have got that ball,” he replied.

His dad’s face turned slightly red. Not a good sign, as Paco knew. When Dad got wound up, there could be trouble. In the form of twenty press-ups, for example. Or fifty. In front of the whole team, naturally.

Bob was the best dad in the world and a cool coach, at least most of the time. But he also flipped his lid very easily. Then he was like a volcano that erupted without any warning. Especially if the ref was being a loser and making weird decisions. But sometimes also when one of his players wasn’t putting the effort in during training. And because Paco was not only, he admitted, a massive lazybones, but also the coach’s son, the cards were already stacked against him. Bob was always worried that the other boys on the team, who were between eleven and twelve like Paco, might think he was letting his son off lightly. But in Paco’s eyes, it was exactly the opposite.

“You should have at least tried!” Bob scolded him.

“Next time,” Paco called out cheerfully, adding a silent “maybe” to himself.

Bob rolled his eyes and clapped his hands together. “Hup, hup, play on!” He didn’t dole out any press-ups this time. The colour of his face had already gone back to normal.

One minute later, a midfielder gave Paco a through ball. He received it elegantly, dodged past a player on the other team and found himself unmarked.

Now it was just his best friend Alex up ahead, in goal. Alex had nerves of steel. He was truly cool. Cooler than a frozen pizza.

Alex stretched his arms out wide, as wide as they would go, but it was no use. Paco plumped for the right-hand corner and drove the ball into the back of the net. Alex managed to get his fingertips on it, but he couldn’t stop it going in.

“Not bad,” sighed Alex, while Paco just grinned.

Two minutes later, Bob ended the first half and gathered the troops together. Drink break.

Feeling shattered, the junior boys squatted down together and sucked at their bottles like a group of thirsty babies.

Coach Bob gave them an enthusiastic talk, criticising and praising them. Paco had never been one for wily tactics. He didn’t pore over football books or watch YouTube videos of Neymar’s tricks and try to copy them. Paco was more of an instinctive footballer, who didn’t think too hard about things. As his dad was talking, his mind wandered. He looked over at the next pitch, where another team was practising. Were they the Swiss boys?

Paco, Alex and their friends from the team were taking part in the Eurokicker tournament, in which highly talented young footballers from all over Europe played against each other – in parallel to the European Championships, where the big stars were playing.

It had been difficult to get into this team. An absolute honour. Six months ago, the German Football Federation had organised a big talent-spotting tournament in Hamburg. Paco had gone with his dad, who already had a lot of experience as a coach. Bob had done his Trainer-A licence and had already coached a third-division team.

More than 500 young footballers, including 200 girls, had taken part in the tournament in Hamburg. They were all desperate to be picked for the German team that would play against other teams from right across Europe. But only 22 boys and girls had finally been chosen. Paco, Alex and the others were very proud to be among them.

And Bob was happy in the end, as well – he was the one the German Football Federation had entrusted with coaching the German talents during the Eurokicker tournament.

The event had been organised by UEFA. As well as the German team, there were youth teams from England, Spain, France, Hungary, Austria, Italy... The competition, which featured girls' and boys' teams, took place in various locations, wherever the Euro games were kicking off, and Munich was one of those cities. Whoever won here would qualify for the final round in London. The teams were staying in tent villages.

Paco was having a brilliant time in the tournament. He had already got to know a lot of young people from different countries. Most of the players were pretty decent people. Of course, this wasn't a children's birthday party, it was a real competition. The aim was to win, to go through to the next round, to victory. And it wasn't just Paco and his friends who wanted that more than anything; they all did.

"Did you hear that, Paco?" Dad's voice suddenly reached his ears.

"Er, yes, sure," Paco stammered. He hadn't heard anything at all, of course.

Alex, sitting beside him, giggled. Bob narrowed his eyes. He seemed to be working out whether his son was taking the mickey again. But this wasn't the right place for a telling-off.

He grunted something, then his eyes roamed over the other players' heads and he went on: "Boys, if you don't take this seriously," – he looked straight at his son – "then we won't stand a chance the day after tomorrow."

Now Paco was all ears again. Right, the difficult game against the French youth team was coming up in two days. The French were the favourites to take the title. A real tough one, then – and a knock-out game. If Paco and his friends lost, they would be out of the tournament. Then they could kiss goodbye to the trip to London for the final, where the big stars would be kicking off in the final of the Euros as well. "So, boys," Bob cried. "I want 100% from you - even in training."