

The greatest pitch I've ever played football on, is Union's Dudenpark in Brussels. On the far side of the antique wooden grandstand there was a sloping hill for the fans to stand on. The wood rose behind it. Trees, preferably very tall ones, add drama to the match. Sleet is very welcome, too. Unfortunately, there was no horse behind the fence of the Dudenpark during the Union-Anderlecht match. In *Vlaamse Velden* (Flemish Fields), Hans van der Meer's slow television which offers me the beauty and comfort of lower league amateur football in these corona virus times, the horse is behind the boarding, advertising Van Melkenbeke's garage. The animal follows the match for a while, walks on without being interested, stops at the sign for Vernailles Jewellery and casts a passing glance at what looks like an offensive.

It's Sunday morning. Somewhere near Aalst, someone is being tackled. With a prolonged 'ooooouch' the victim falls down. 'Daddy! Daddy!' – a child shouts. The father lies struck down in the mud of the penalty area, which resembles a battlefield of the Great War. I'm enjoying this.

It's bitterly cold. A tall, skinny man in shorts and lily-white socks manages an elegant heel flick. You can see him thinking: 'I'm approaching my absolute top form, soon I'll be setting the offside trap.'

The horse turns its head. By now, there's a sheep lying down behind the dug-out.

A sudden explosion. There's a goal. The cry of joy of the small crowd of fans is greater than when Messi scores in a sold-out Nou Camp. The opposing team is dealing with this devastating blow with drooping shoulders. No one's blaming anyone, they're just defeated. And in the background, there's this row of poplars.

The referee blows his whistle three times. Twenty-two football players saunter back to the dressing room, aching all over, their will broken: once again, it was a beautiful, well-spent Sunday.

Jan Mulder, April 2020

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