

## Playing by Numbers

By ALISON L R DAVIES

Sophie hated hockey. She hated the fact that she could never run fast enough to hit the ball, and that the nearest she got to a hockey stick was being clattered around the ankle with it. It was hardly a surprise that no one ever picked her for their team. Most of all though, Sophie hated the arguments. There was always some dispute or other centred around the game and Emily Hunt was usually at the heart of it. This time she'd started before they'd even got on the pitch. They were in the changing rooms and Emily was holding court. Her thin lips stretched to a sparkling smile, her blonde curls tied loosely in a bow.



"You know I'm the best," she was saying to her groupies.

"It's been proved, and anyway that's why Miss Johnson made me team captain."

"Well I can tackle better than anybody." Lucy Watkins added.

Emily shook her head and a curl escaped in her eye.

"You can't tackle better than me and you know it."

"Yes I can!"

Sophie turned from the window.

"Why don't you all shut up?" She snapped.

She didn't know where it had come from but the words fell from her mouth and landed with a loud slap on the floor. A locker door slammed, and six pairs of eyes regarded her with amusement.

"Ooooh er! Who do you think you are?"

"And who asked for your opinion **loser?**"

The insults started to fly thick and fast, as Sophie backed into the wall.

She had to say something; she knew it. But what could she say, how could she stand up to them all? She'd always been the quiet one, the one nobody noticed at all.

"Are you saying you don't think I'm the best hockey player in the school Sophie Elliot?" It was Emily, her grin ever expanding.

"No, I never said that." Sophie sighed. "But where's your proof?" she took a breath. "I mean how can you say that you're the best when you don't have any evidence?" She wasn't sure why she said it, but something clicked in her head. It was as if a tiny voice had taken over her thoughts.

"What do you mean evidence? It's obvious I'm the best. I wouldn't be picked for the top team if I weren't."

"That still doesn't mean anything; you have to look at the larger picture. You have to do a proper survey."

Emily wrinkled her nose and the other girls sniggered.

"What the hell does she mean survey? Ignore her!"

But Emily wasn't about to walk away with her pride in question.

"Okay then. We will do a survey, we'll ask everyone in the school, and then we'll see. Meet me here this time tomorrow, and you'd better pray that I'm right otherwise..." And she crunched her fist and raised it in front of Sophie's nose.

Why did I do that? Sophie thought, and really, where did the silly idea of a survey come from?

"From me!" Came the voice inside her head.

Or was it outside her head because it sounded close to her left ear.

Sophie swung round, one-way and then the other. There was no one there. "Great, now I'm hearing things!" She grumbled.

"Me too! Isn't it fun?"

Sophie turned around again, and that's when she saw him; a funny little eyeball of a man with tiny stick arms and legs. He was a strange shade of purple, a bit like her mother's amethyst necklace and he looked ridiculous

with one huge iris, blinking.

"Name's Data Cruncher, Master Data Cruncher to be correct."

He held out a wiry arm. Sophie edged closer, there was no one else around, the changing room was deserted as the other kids were out on the field. Everything seemed to have frozen in time.

"Are you real?" She asked.

"Are you?" He replied with a smile.

"I don't know what to say."

"I know." He grinned again, "I heard you earlier. You were a bit lost for words, that's why I helped out."

"You helped out? You were the one who got me to say those things?"

"Yes, clever of me wasn't it?"

"Not really," and Sophie sighed. "Now I'm in even more of a mess. It's bad enough that the other girls don't like me, but at least they never really noticed me. Now they think I'm ridiculous and Emily Hunt is out to get me for sure."

The Eyeball man blinked solemnly then leaped on a ledge and perched with his arms and legs crossed.

"All you need is to play around with some data."

"Data?"

"Yes, numbers, information..."

"Numbers? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Numbers have everything to do with *everything*, that's the point."

"But I'm useless at maths!"

"Ah but there are different ways of looking at figures. You call it statistics, I call it data crunching."

"Yeah right." Sophie shook her head.

The man sprang from his sitting position down to her side in a delicate pirouette. "So this Emily girl is going to ask around, she's going to get all her friends to say she's the best at hockey, but that's doesn't prove anything. She's got to consider all sorts of factors."

"Like what?"

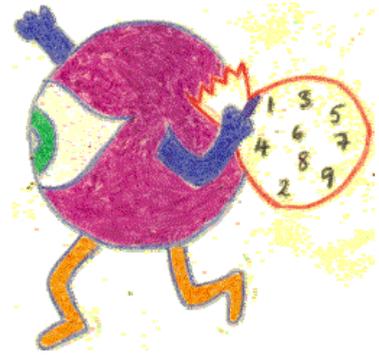
"Like how long she's played it for starters, and how many times she's practised. You need to ask a representative sample."

Sophie shrugged, "I still don't understand."

"Well how can she call herself the best unless she's got something to compare it to? She'd have to survey all the other hockey players in the school, and she'd have to look at how long they'd played it and how much they practised, and who they think is the best player, to come up with real data to support her argument. Then of course if she were really going to do it properly she'd have to do a tally chart and put all the information into a table. That's the only easy way to present these facts."

"But I don't get how this will help me? If she doesn't come out top, I'm for it, that's what she said."

The little man grinned; his mouth moved to reveal a row of perfectly filed and gleaming teeth.



"You leave that to me! There are other ways of impressing people, besides bullying and I've an idea."

Afternoon break the following day came faster than Sophie expected.

She'd been working hard, putting Data Cruncher's advice into practise and to be honest she'd quite enjoyed herself. Maths could actually be fun, especially when you juggled around with it. She'd got to talk to an entire new set of girls; she'd got into creating charts and making them look good. In fact the day had flown by and now she was prepared. It was a good feeling, to know that she'd done this. She'd conquered both her fear of maths and was now about to face the immovable Emily. Could she really do this? Her stomach fluttered with excitement. "Okay squirt." It was Emily's voice bouncing from the lockers. "You really have asked for this."

She pushed forward, a wall of several other girls behind her.

"My mates here say I'm the best at hockey, at netball, at whatever you want, and they've come to shut you up, for good!"

She sniggered, "How stupid are you? I'd at least have thought you'd have the sense to chicken out."

Sophie chewed her lip, "I'm not stupid! You're the one that's stupid. You think this proves anything. You see I've done a survey of hockey players in the school, past and present, and I've taken into consideration their views, the amount of games they've played, and won, and well I can honestly say that Jessica Simpson is the best hockey player this school has." She shoved her papers into Emily's face.

"What's this rubbish?"

They're the charts and stats I've done to support my theories."

"Are you mad?" And Emily knocked them to the floor.

"No, but I am."

The voice was deeper than the other girls and seemed to waver above their heads. They looked up to see a sixth form girl with dyed red hair and black kohl smudged eyes. "I'm Jessica Simpson."

Emily gulped. "Oh, I didn't see you there."

The other girls turned to run.

"Seems like you weren't paying attention," Jessica grinned. "Perhaps you could help Sophie with her charts. She seems to have dropped them and that's a shame after all the hard work she's done."

Emily nodded and began scrabbling on the floor.

Sophie smiled.

Thank you Data Cruncher, she whispered. And somewhere in another time and place, in a land where numbers grow larger than trees, a tiny eyeball of a man blinked his joy, and began to search for other ways to play around with data.

THE END

