

HEAD TO HEAD

Jennifer Manuel

**James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers
Toronto**

*For my friend Julie, whose strength and support and loyalty both
on and off the field showed me what it means to belong.
You are a true leader of the pack.*

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Published in Canada in 2020. Published in the United States in 2021.

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James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers acknowledges funding support from the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), an agency of the Government of Ontario. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada and with the support of Ontario Creates.

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Cover design: Gwen North

Cover image: Shutterstock

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Head to head / Jennifer Manuel.

Names: Manuel, Jennifer, author.

Series: Sports stories.

Description: Series statement: Sports stories

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200203517 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200203630 |

ISBN 9781459414280 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459414297 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8625.A69 H43 2020 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published by:
James Lorimer &
Company Ltd., Publishers
117 Peter Street, Suite 304
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5V 0M3
www.lorimer.ca

Distributed in Canada by:
Formac Lorimer Books
5502 Atlantic Street
Halifax, NS, Canada
B3H 1G4

Distributed in the US by:
Lerner Publisher Services
1251 Washington Ave. N.
Minneapolis, MN, USA
55401
www.lernerbooks.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

Manufactured by.

Job #

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1 **Leader of THE PACK**

Emika Tanaka received a pass from forward Rosa Cruz and turned up the left wing. Emika sprinted, pushing the soccer ball ahead with her cleats. Wetness from the cold grass soaked her ankles. Out of the corner of her eye she could see a defender racing to cut her off.

“We’re with you, Emika!” Rosa shouted. She and the other Victoria Wolves forwards streaked up the field.

The Oak Bay Lions defender closed the gap on Emika. Slowing down, Emika searched for someone open. All her midfielders were covered by Lions players. All her forwards, too. Even Rosa, although she was working hard to lose her check. Everyone was covered except Maram Kassab, but she was far away on the opposite wing.

The Lions defender lunged at the ball to steal it. Emika tapped it ahead with the inside of her foot. Stepping her leg over the ball, Emika kicked it with the outside of her other foot. The scissor move fooled the defender into going in the wrong direction.

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Emika burst down the wing once again.

“Drive to the net! Drive to the net!” Emika’s best friend, Jabira Kassab, was cheering from the sidelines.

The defender chased after Emika. Glancing across the field, Emika spotted Maram again. This time Maram had cut across the field toward the goal. She was just ahead of Rosa, open at the top of the eighteen-yard box.

But if I don’t make the pass perfect, Emika worried, Maram will glare at me, like she always does.

Then Emika remembered what Rosa had said to her at the start of the season: “You and Maram might think you hate each other. But our team is a wolf pack. We stick together.”

With a sudden twist of her hips, Emika booted the ball as hard as she could. It arced high above the field, spinning toward the centre of the goal area.

Out of breath, Emika slowed to a jog.

“Keep pushing to the net, Emika!” Coach Bella Garcia yelled.

Emika picked up the pace as she watched Maram beat a defender and race toward the bouncing ball. The goalkeeper paused for a second, then tried to get to the ball before Maram. They almost crashed into each other.

Leaping into the air, Maram kicked the ball over the goalkeeper’s shoulder. As the goalkeeper spun around, she lost her footing and slid to the ground. Maram sped past her and drilled the ball at the net.

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The ball rebounded hard off the crossbar — straight to Rosa. Maram crouched low, ready to help Rosa or get the rebound if Rosa missed, too.

But there would be no rebound. Rosa trapped the ball with her thigh and shot it into the open net.

“Goal!” Jabira yelled.

It was 3–1 Wolves.

As Rosa jogged toward the centre line, she patted the Lions goalkeeper on the shoulder. “Great effort, keeper, great effort.”

Just like Rosa to cheer on everyone, Emika chuckled to herself. Even the other team.

Then Rosa turned and pointed at Emika. “Super cross! Way to set up the play! You’re so good at sensing everyone on the field!”

Emika grinned with pride. Then her smile faded as she remembered that this was Rosa’s last game with the Victoria Wolves. Next week Rosa would be moving to Vancouver with her family. Not only would Emika miss Rosa, but she also expected the team’s six-game winning streak to come to an end. Worse yet, how could Emika and Maram play together without Rosa to push them past their differences?

Rosa is the best captain ever, Emika thought. No one could ever lead the wolf pack better than Rosa.

Rosa pointed at Maram and said, “Great shot.”

Maram frowned. “I missed.”

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Rosa shrugged. “Did you walk off the field because you missed?”

“Of course not,” Maram said.

“Of course not,” Rosa said as they took their positions at centre line. “Missing isn’t the end of the game. You stuck with it, like you always do. You sure set a great example for the rest of us, Maram. Right, Emika?”

Emika clenched her jaw. The last thing she wanted to do was say something nice about Maram. Everyone knew that they had never gotten along since they started playing together two years ago. Still, Emika didn’t want to let Rosa down. She nodded. “Yup.”

Maram acted as if she didn’t hear Emika. “Thanks, Rosa.”

Emika rolled her eyes. *That Maram is as cold as the wet grass*, she thought.

After the game, Jabira waited on the sidelines with a bowl of orange slices for the team. Jabira was the biggest cheerleader for the Wolves, and Maram’s sister. Although Jabira loved soccer, she found it too much to be on a team of her own, because of her cerebral palsy. It made it a challenge for her to run for long.

Often Emika and Jabira passed the ball around in the park. Emika adored Jabira. She wished Jabira’s sister could be more like her.

“Three to one! The winning streak continues!” Jabira said to Emika.

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“Not for long,” Emika said. “Not once Rosa’s gone.”

“Rosa’s great,” Jabira said. “But she’s just one player.”

Emika sighed. “She’s not just one player. She’s our captain. She’s the best captain ever. She’s the leader of the pack. She brings the whole team together.”

Rosa reached around Emika and took an orange slice from Jabira’s bowl. “Don’t worry, Emika. I have the perfect plan for replacing me. I already ran it past Coach Garcia.”

Emika looked at Rosa with doubt in her eyes.

“Trust me.” Rosa smiled.

“I do.” Emika smiled back.

Rosa nudged Emika’s shoulder playfully. “Just don’t forget it.”

“I won’t,” Emika said.

“Promise?”

Emika gave a nod. “Promise.”