

Nighttime at a German POW camp during World War II. A prisoner crawls on his belly alongside one bunkhouse and underneath another. Reaching the barbed-wire fence, he starts cutting through them with wire clippers. A patrol dog catches his scent and races toward him, barking. Alarms sound, a search light illuminates the prisoner, who gets tangled in more barbed wire and razor ribbon in his panic. German machine-gun fire replaces half of the prisoner's internal flesh and blood with bullet shrapnel, and he collapses in the barbed wire.

Two cars, one bearing a Swiss flag emblem, ride through the German countryside and arrive at the POW camp. Three English POWs don their military uniforms and stride out of their bunkhouse to meet the occupants of the cars. Three German officers introduce two Swiss Red Cross diplomats, Herrs Rinder and Doktor, to the senior English POW, Colonel Waldron (Daniel Massey). Waldron exchanges military salutes with two of the German officers, including Major Karl von Steiner (Max von Sydow). Waldron and Steiner look at each other as they exchange salutes, in a manner that suggests they're familiar with each other. Waldron's two cohorts are Major Rose (Tim Pigott-Smith) of the English Intelligence Committee, and Wing Commander Shurlock, who is introduced by the camp's Kommandant (George Mikell) as head of the camp's "Escape Committee -" the three English officers discreetly provide aid to POWs seeking to escape from the camp. The two Swiss officials are there to investigate the killing of an English officer during an escape attempt. The senior German officer assures all parties gathered that the killing was "accidental" and asks to conduct a tour of the camp, to ensure the Swiss officials that the prisoners are being treated properly within the guidelines of the Geneva Conventions.

Steiner turns as he walks, watching some POWs kick a soccer ball around. One of them, an American named Hatch (Sylvester Stallone), kicks the ball close to Steiner. Steiner steps forward to stop the ball's forward motion with a boot. Hatch, trying to show respect, asks for the ball's return. Using just his foot, Steiner lifts the ball from the ground, juggles it in the air a few times and lightly kicks it up to where another POW catches it with his hands. This second POW is an Englishman named Colby (Michael Caine), whom Steiner recognizes as a professional player with Westham United and England.

At night, from his bunkhouse, Hatch watches a German officers quarters. He watches a German officer and his girlfriend get into a car and leave the POW camp. Later, Hatch is playing bridge with Rose and Waldron while Colby sits on a bunk and reads. Rose and Waldron question Colby about his conversation with Steiner. They understand that Steiner recognized Colby because Steiner played for the German National team in 1938. Colby answers evasively, avoiding the details of his brief exchange of words with Steiner. They all pause as Shurlock taps into a radio report on the state of the war, and the inhumane treatment of Eastern European prisoners.

The next day, Steiner approaches Colby as he watches Allied prisoners at play on

the soccer field. Steiner suggests the idea of a friendly challenge: Colby putting together a team of POWs from the camp to play a regulation soccer match against a German team from a nearby German Army post. Colby is interested in the idea, but his rational side quickly notes that the POWs are dressed mostly in partial military attire and mostly wear military boots, all of which are unsuitable for playing a regulation soccer match. Further, as prisoners are only fed sufficient rations to avoid hunger-related illness, they're in no condition to play a regulated 90-minute match. Steiner says that proper athletic gear can be supplied, and when Colby asks if Steiner can also ensure that the team members all stay in the same bunk and eat together - proper rations suitable for getting back into physical shape - Steiner agrees, since Colby says that if Steiner can come through, he'd put together a team to play against the Germans.

Hatch goes to see Waldron and the Escape Committee to discuss a plan he's concocted. He says the plan hinges on the fact that some German patrol guards don't conduct their regular patrol routes while his bunk is showering. These guards, instead, will come into the shower building, bum a smoke or two and make small talk with the POWs, which alleviates their boredom from their patrol chores. Hatch is sure that if someone went missing from the prisoners that were showering, the guards wouldn't report it, because they'd think they'd miscounted and leave the matter be until roll call. If the Escape Committee arranged to cover for Hatch at roll call, he could be gone for days. Hatch also knows that a vent in the shower bunker leads into a storeroom. If he could get in there, with something to pick the lock, he'd be back in the enclosure where he started - alone. He would be able to get onto the roof undetected, slip underneath the barbed wire, and drop into the German officer compound. He has several ideas of how to escape the camp altogether from there. The committee, interest piqued, agrees to discuss the ideas with Hatch.

Waldron has also taken notice of Colby beginning to put a team together for the soccer challenge. He's disturbed by the fact that Colby is refusing to pick only officers for the team. Colby wants the best players available in the camp - enlisted men, or 'the lads,' as he calls them. Waldron summons Colby to the committee's bunk and tells him that they want to use the soccer match to arrange for the team's escape from prison. But Colby is incensed at the suggestions; he doesn't want to see good young men get killed.

Steiner is facing scrutiny by his peers and superiors for arranging the match. Some of them are deeply concerned, but one German propaganda officer, Herr Lorenz, is intrigued, seeing a major opportunity to promote the concept of German superiority, especially in light of the fact that Germany's best professional soccer teams have yet to beat the English.

Colby goes about recruiting players - Sid Harmer (Mike Summerbee) and Terry Bradshaw (Bobby Moore) from England, and Luis Fernandez (Pelé) from Brazil. Hatch wants to join the team in hopes of using them as a cover for his escape

plan, but he proves to be unskilled as a player, and moreover, after a year of admonishment from Colby, he still doesn't distinguish between soccer (which the Europeans call football), and American football, which more closely resembles English rugby. Colby rails at Hatch after he executes a tackle from American football rules, and orders him off the field.

While washing his hands, Hatch quietly counts to himself, seeing his count is perfectly synchronized with a particular German guard's patrol. Shurlock goes up to Hatch and tells him that the Escape Committee will provide him aid for his escape plan. They will arrange to have him seen by a tailor, a forger, and a locksmith to carefully provide him with tools, civilian clothes, and documents to help get away to neutral territory after he escapes the camp. Satisfied, Hatch finds Colby and vents his frustration at him, telling him and his forming soccer team off.

Colby is brought to Steiner, who regretfully says that his superiors have assumed control of arranging the match, which will take place on August 15th at Colombes Stadium in Paris, France, and they are going to field a team of top German national players. Steiner introduces Colby to the German officer who will coach the national team - a Hauptmann Muller (Gary Waldhorn), whom Colby had actually met in London many years ago, before the war. Further, Muller has arranged for a number of top players, now POWs in other prison camps, from England, France, and even Norway, to join Colby's team. But Colby says he also can think of several Polish and Czech players who would need to be on his squad - players who, because of their nationality, are not recognized as official POWs by the German elite, and are instead in labor camps. Staying calm and speaking rationally, Colby points out that regardless of official German decree, those players do exist as human beings, and Steiner can find out where they are and pull some strings to get them to the camp to train for the team. Colby invokes the 'officer and a gentleman' code which would oblige Steiner to see that Colby has at least a marginal chance of his team winning.

A special bunkhouse is being built to house the soccer team at the prison camp, which Waldron and the Escape committee note with mild displeasure. They warn Colby that the German propaganda machine will ensure that senior London officials will know of the match, and that Colby helped put it together, which would make him look bad.

Meanwhile, the Escape Committee's operatives are helping prepare Hatch for his escape. They work with him in forging a passport, a cover identity, and a reason for returning to his 'home town.' It will take some time to finish the preparations until Hatch can actually execute his escape; more time than Hatch cares for.

But time is something Hatch no longer has. On his way out of the bunkhouse, he passes by the shower hall and sees two guards he doesn't recognize... and who are sticking to the necessary patrol route, with no slacking or goofing off.

Confronting Shurlock, Hatch is shocked to hear that the committee knows about the new guards - Hans and Anton, the two shower guards who slack off on patrol, have been reassigned to watch over Colby's team. These new guards who do their duty as expected, have made Hatch's whole escape plan unfeasible.

Hatch's only option is to try and get back into Colby's good graces and try to get on the team. A friendly approach and offering to work as a trainer for the team, fall short. Hatch finally confronts Colby about his planned escape, and explains how the slacking shower guards he relied on, are now assigned to watch the football team. Colby doesn't want to see Hatch get shot, but Hatch points out that it's his choice and his risk to take. Colby finally relents and lets Hatch be the team's trainer.

The remaining Allied players from other prison camps arrive. Hatch and Colby greet them, and they're brought into the team bunkhouse for a meal. The team's athletic gear arrives and Hatch begins putting the team through a workout regimen to get back into shape. During practice of soccer technique, Hatch catches a few balls and it's noted that although he doesn't kick or dribble the ball well, he has potential as a goalkeeper.

The Eastern European players arrive. Waldron grills Colby about his arranging to have them brought over. The former soccer greats are now frail and nearly emaciated from hardly being fed at the labor camps, and are now filthy and covered in lice-infested rags of clothing from the harsh conditions they live in. Waldron tells Colby that London knows about all this and Colby will be in hot water with the English army's high command when the war is over. Hatch has the team get water and soap so the Eastern European players can be properly cleaned up and dressed.

The Eastern European players are being fed in the team bunkhouse. Colby quietly takes the rest of the team aside and explains that he's responsible for the players being there, and he's responsible for sending them back to the labor camps if the team doesn't play. Colby refuses to take that responsibility on himself, but he likewise acknowledges it's not right for him to ask any of the other players to disobey their own country's high military command, so each of them must make their own decisions. All of the players unhesitatingly say that they want to play the match.

All of the papers and preparations for Hatch's escape are now in place. Waldron summons Hatch to the Escape Committee's bunkhouse to pick up his passport - and an assignment they want to ask him to undertake. Waldron asks Hatch to travel to Paris and make contact with the resistance movement there, and ask them to help arrange the escape of the whole football team. The French resistance against the German occupation can provide shelter and safe houses for him, and if they can't or wouldn't help the team escape, they would at least help Hatch get to safety in Spain or Switzerland. Hatch is reluctant at first, but

finally agrees to help Colby and the team.

The football team helps Hatch by distracting the guards, giving them cigarettes and making small talk while in the shower hall. Hatch climbs up and carefully rolls back the wire grate over the vent. Two inmates toss him a small bundle with his papers and civilian clothes. At night Hatch goes up on the roof, clips the barbed-wire attachments so he can go underneath them, and remembering the timing of the German guard patrols and search lights, crawls across the ground to avoid them until he reaches a bunkhouse near the front gate. Knowing that a particular German officer leaves the compound every night with his girlfriend, he waits for the car to pull up to the gate, then carefully secretes himself along the footboard, shielded from view by the gate guards, by the body of the car. The car pulls out of the camp onto the countryside road, and Hatch drops off, running into the woods.

Hatch makes it to a train station and buys a train ticket to Paris. Making his way to a tavern mentioned to him by Waldron as a resistance contact point, he buys a drink and sits at a table. A few minutes later, he signals the bartender for a refill and carefully writes a roman numeral V on the table. The barkeep refills his drink and wipes the mark off the table.

Hatch is at a safe house while several Resistance leaders talk. They don't seem very encouraged at the idea of staging an escape for the whole team, and tell Hatch that there's too much risk of an open battle starting in the streets. But then one of them mentions that the Germans will have a whole battalion at the Colombes Stadium. The eldest of the three says that having worked in the sewers, he knows that a branch of the sewers goes up into the stadium's foundation, leading to the Seine river. The other two decide they will all go to have a look. Andre (Amidou), who speaks English, explains to Hatch and tells him to stay at the safe house with Renee (Carole Laure), who lives there.

Renee finishes preparing a meal and silently gestures for Hatch to sit and eat. Hatch tries to show some gratitude by striking up some small talk with his hostess, but Renee is very distant and unwilling to talk, although she acknowledges that she speaks English fluently. When Hatch tells her his name, she finally tells him that she doesn't want to know anything about him, because if she hears that Hatch has gotten caught or killed, she'll remember everything she hears about his family and loved ones, and it will make her mourn. Hatch wins her over by telling her he has no family, and finally gets her to open up a little about herself. Renee says her husband was killed in the earliest battles of the war, but she lives with a young son named Francois.

The football team has been covering for Hatch at roll call with a papier-mâché dummy dressed in similar clothes and painted to look like Hatch. But one morning during roll call, the head of the dummy falls off and the camp's commandant sees. Steiner warns Colby that Hatch's escape has made him look bad with the commandant and the high command, and he will be increasing the guard on the

football team, to which Colby acquiesces without complaint.

The French resistance leaders go into the sewers and find their way to a foundation pipe for the stadium. Showing some hand-drawn maps to Hatch, Andre explains to Hatch and says they are not sure which pipe it is. They need to steal the stadium's original blueprints and they could end up running into a concrete wall. They believe the best chance is that the pipe will lead into the visiting team's dressing room and the team will be able to slip into the sewer tunnel at halftime.

Andre then tells Hatch that he has to go back to the prison camp. Colby and Colonel Waldron must know the resistance will be coming, and how. Hatch is horrified and disgusted, to say nothing of which, he has no idea how he's supposed to get back inside. Andre knows that if Hatch lets German soldiers capture him, they will send him back to the same prison camp he escaped from, to show the other prisoners that his escape was a failure. Hatch gives his papers and passport to Renee in hopes that they can be used for another escaped prisoner that she might shelter in the near future.

As Hatch is returned to the camp, he puts the backs of his hands against his forehead while looking at Rose, who realizes this is a symbol for the Roman messenger god, Mercury. Rose understands from the gesture that Hatch has come back with a message from the French resistance. The problem is, how to learn what this message is - Hatch is promptly put into solitary as punishment for escape, and will not be let out of it until after the soccer match. Waldron dumps the problem in Colby's lap by reminding him that unless he goes along with a planned escape for the team, he faces court-martial in England after the war for the 'fiasco' over the Eastern European players brought in from the labor camps.

Colby and Waldron are brought to the commandant's office where Steiner tells Waldron that he and Rose will be brought to the stadium to be seen with other senior officers from various camps, even though Waldron flatly refuses to be a 'representative' of his country. Colby asks to have Hatch released, but Steiner says he can get the team a trainer. Colby has to make up a story to Steiner that the team's goalie has broken his arm and Hatch is the best person to replace him. Of course, Colby must then break this news to the goalie... and break his arm.

The team is seen being ferried to a train station which takes them to France, and then by truck to the stadium. They are given the visiting team's dressing room. Meanwhile, Andre and several French Resistance drive to a sewer grate and put up a barrier to show sewer workers working. They descend into the sewers and begin digging through the foundation stones.

During the opening pomp and circumstance for the match, Steiner sits with a German officer who casually reveals during conversation that the referee has been specially picked to call the action in favor of the Germans, despite Steiner having given his word otherwise. The Germans are taking no chances of a

propaganda stunt backfiring in their faces and embarrassing them. Even the lead commentator (Anton Diffring) is handpicked to deliver heavily pro-German commentary via radio broadcast.

Renee is in the stands with her young son, Francois. Handing him a small bouquet, she sends him onto the field. Under the guise of bringing the flowers to Hatch, Francois tells Hatch that the football team's escape will be carried out during halftime.

The game begins and the Germans quickly take initiative. The Allies almost score a goal, but the German goalkeeper catches the shot. The German team begins to play dirty, knowing the referee will call in their favor. Through a penalty kick given them and Hatch moving too far off the line, leaving the goal unguarded, the Germans quickly mount a four-zero lead. Colby finally reins Hatch in to stay on his line, but the Germans begin targeting two of the better Allied players. They injure Dutchman Pieter Van Beck (Co Prins), forcing the Allies to take him off the field. When Fernandez leaves the Germans befuddled with several fake-outs, they trip him and hit him hard in his stomach. Fernandez scowls as he's taken off the field. Colby decides to play one man short. Hatch catches a shot and in the convergence over the ball, one German player kicks him in the head. The Allied team finally gets fed up and begins to play more aggressively, working together to continually disarm the Germans of the ball. Brady scores a goal for the Allies, bringing the crowd to its feet.

Halftime arrives, and the Allies arrive back in their dressing room in high spirits. Colby hears the sound of thumping coming from the bottom of a filled bath basin, and all the players gather around it. Hatch tells the team that their escape has been arranged and they are leaving now. The tiles at the bottom of the basin are broken through, and the water begins gushing down the hole. A ladder pokes through the hole and one of the French resistance climbs up, greeting the Allies and telling them to hurry.

But as Hatch and Colby begin ushering the Allied players down the ladder into the sewer tunnel, several of them begin to protest. They want to play the game through to its conclusion, even at the cost of their freedom. Hatch is mortified at this, having planned his own escape for over a year, but Colby's loyalty is to his team - if they are dedicated to playing and winning, then he is too. But if Hatch refuses to go back with them, then they have to go with him on the escape. Hatch is the only one available to play as goalkeeper.

Fernandez finally makes an impassioned plea to Hatch, about how the team will lose much more than a game if they go through with the escape. Hatch is stunned as he listens.

Halftime ends, and the French spectators cheer enthusiastically as the Allied team emerges from their dressing room, waving and smiling to the crowd.

Waldron and Rose, sitting among the various POW officers, are shocked to see the Allied team. Renee rises from her seat in disbelief. But as the game resumes, it quickly becomes clear that the Allied players now mean business. They go all-out into attack, working together to maintain control of the ball. Argentinean Carlos Rey (Osvaldo Ardiles) gets control of the ball and maneuvers it brilliantly up the field, scoring the second goal for the Allies. When the Allies score their third goal, even Waldron and Rose are applauding enthusiastically.

A montage of both German goalkeeper Schmidt (Laurie Sivell) and Hatch protecting their respective goals, warding off goal shots are shown. The game goes back and forth until, with only four minutes left, Rey, Brady and Belgian Michel Filieu (Paul Van Himst), all working together, maneuver the ball back up the field and Filieu scores the tying goal for the Allies.

Suddenly the referee begins blowing his whistle and gesturing. He has disallowed the tying goal, declaring several Allied players off-sides. The lead commentator pounces on this, dutifully spouting his pro-German propaganda. The Allied players argue vociferously but the referee refuses to budge.

Fernandez signals to Colby and asks to rejoin the game. He's completely fed up with the German team's cheating, aided by a completely biased referee. Colby signals that Fernandez is rejoining the game, and the spectators cheer.

As play resumes, Fernandez quickly gains control of the ball and fakes his way past several Germans, using his shoulders to hinder German players trying to press him and hit his stomach again. They trip him, causing him to stumble, but Fernandez regains his balance and kicks the ball up the field, passing it to Brady near the end zone. Brady catches the ball on his chest and kicks it back into the center of the end zone.

As several German players leap to head the ball, Fernandez maneuvers into position and executes an overhead bicycle kick maneuver to score a perfect goal (shown in slow motion three times). Even Steiner gives a spirited standing ovation (to the ridicule of his fellow German officers). The whole crowd, including Waldron and Rose among the POW officers, are cheering and applauding wildly. The entire stadium comes alive with spectators chanting "Victoire!" (French for Victory).

The Allies nearly score yet another goal, but Schmidt makes a beautiful save which the lead commentator immediately uses to heap praise on him. The Germans gain control of the ball and team captain, Baumann (Werner Roth), seems almost ready to score when Rey tries to tackle the ball and Baumann trips on his feet. The referee immediately calls a foul and awards the Germans a penalty kick as time runs out, the lead commentator spouting garbage commentary about the Allies "deliberately resorting to fouling" at "the end of the game."



As the players all assemble in position for the penalty kick, the French spectators begin to sing the Marseilles, their national anthem and battle song, in a loud, spirited voice. Baumann and Hatch meet at the spot where the ball is placed for the penalty kick. The two look intently at each other for several long seconds before Baumann finally gives a respectful nod, which Hatch returns as he steps back onto the goal line.

As the French spectators cheer him on, Hatch leaps and catches the penalty kick, saving the game. All the other players crowd around him, leaping into the air and cheering along with him, as the spectators all go wild.

Suddenly, as Waldron and Rose watch in delight, the entire crowd knocks down the barriers and pours out onto the field, many of them grappling German security officers struggling futilely to regain order. The crowd mobs around the Allied players and begin to run them across the field.

Renee finds her way to Hatch and kisses him, as another Frenchman pulls off his long coat and puts it onto Hatch. Brady and Colby are covered with French berets and coats as several other Frenchman pull off Fernandez's shirt as they run with him. Steiner watches the Allied players disappear into the mob and under French street clothes with a surprised smile. The mob stampedes its way to the front gate, easily forcing it open and sweeping the German guards trying to hold it closed, aside like children, running out of the Colombes stadium and into the streets of Paris, taking the Allied players to freedom.