It seems hard to believe that this is actually the sixth Christmas missive I’ve sat down to write in six years. Of course, some might add that if I’d been as disciplined when I sit down to write my books and articles, the Makin household would be much more prosperous, but that’s another story… Anyway, the sixth Christmas letter is underway. Sadly, underway very late, but the term and the year have been overwhelmingly busy, and I have to apologize to my readers (or, more accurately, recipients), almost all of whom will not have this document until close to the New Year, maybe even later. On the other hand, last year’s letter didn’t make it into Russian, while I do have high hopes that the 2005 model will be bilingual. Successful translation, however, depends on the other side of the household, so that’s out of my hands. There is one innovation for this year, though: there’s now a virtual archive of previous letters and other such illustrated family materials -- if you really feel nostalgic, and want to read all of the Makin reports again, or to compare English and Russian versions, where both exist, or even to read some Dexter Sports Reports, you should follow the link you’ll find at the end of this epistle (although you probably have much better things to do with your time…).

I’ll begin by following another tradition: many may wish to look only at the pictures (if that), after reading the first couple of paragraphs. So here’s the “executive summary” (you can see I’ve served on too many committees, but be glad that I’m providing this summary without bullet marks): we’ve had another very busy year; Gordon and Neil thrive, with particular success notable in football (Gordon and his team won a very big league championship, and Neil won three championships on small-sided teams), but school is going fine, too – Gordon is an enthusiastic reader, and Neil is enthusiastic; we stayed in the States this summer and had major work done to our house (long overdue), while Alina heroically completed a big academic project; I wrote a bit, published a bit, taught a bit, and got older, my only major accomplishment over the entire year being that I coached Neil’s three-a-side football team to the odd tournament success; our dog Tikhon and cats Stasie and Friendsie are fine, and we have three lovely and much-loved rats. There is one other very big piece of news, but I just can’t bring myself to put it here and spoil the surprise for those who will read this letter – so other readers, if they’re curious, will still have to scan the following pages (hint: look for the different coloured font).

Now – the weather report. We’ve had a very mild, long, and beautiful autumn, but are paying for it at the moment. Right at Thanksgiving there was a major snow fall, and we’ve had quite a lot more snow since. Last night it seemed to snow for hours (although the boys woke up to the disappointing news that school had not been cancelled, as it was last week). We’ve had quite a few days with temperatures down around -15, although right now it’s reasonably mild (just a few degrees below zero). Tikhon loves the snow (he refuses to come into the house most days), and the boys love the sledding. I wish I had put new tyres on my ageing vehicle. This afternoon I gave Tikhon his usual one-mile walk in the woods behind our house, and enjoyed the still, although rapidly cooling air, the bright blue sky, and the trees heavy with snow. Then I remembered that I hadn’t finished my grading, had proofs to read, and an article owed to an editor in Poland. So I sat down to write this instead…

If I recall correctly, that was about the state of panic and unpreparedness with which we greeted the approach of Christmas last year – we ended up buying our tree very late, just about got ready for Christmas, and just about made it to the Christmas Eve service at the First Congregational Church. I remember Alina pointing out that the family in the pew ahead of us was German, and I’m sure that my immediate response was to begin humming the “March of the Dam Busters”, while Alina hissed “don’t talk about the War”. After Neil had petted the donkeys, sheep, and camel (yes, camel), at the living Nativity Scene we headed home to begin celebration – only to find out that we had run out of propane – our heating fuel (country life…). It wasn’t delivered until the 27th, so we froze through two days of festive merriment, one spent with friends we’d invited weeks before. Our main concern, given the cold inside the house (nearly matching the cold outside, it seemed), was the health of our pets – our boys just wore their coats, so they were fine. One of our Christmas presents to one another was a new pet...
rat, whom we named Snuffles, and we had especial concern over the smallest members of the household in the freezing cold. In fact, one of them suffered respiratory problems caused by our ineffective use of the fireplace, and I ended up having to administer steroid injections to her over the break. A new career in veterinary science seemed to beckon, until I considered that not every pet was as amenable as our beloved Missie. We recovered quietly from our freezing Christmas with what Alina called an “old-person’s New Year” (she cooked a complicated African fish stew she’d wanted to try out since she found the recipe at an exhibition at the Fields Museum in Chicago, and we all trotted off to bed around 1 a.m.). Russian Christmas brought further unanticipated events: Alina drove my car to Ann Arbor to buy what we needed for our planned meal; in a supermarket car park during a snow storm, someone driving an old pickup truck backed into her (and thus into my car); Alina was not at fault, but that didn’t improve my humour when she got home, and I discovered that, in addition to the damage to the back of the Land Rover, my license plate — “ITFC OK” — had dropped off. It took forever to get a replacement (the relevant office of the State of Michigan must be full of Norwich supporters). I spent most of January driving a Dodge Durango (don’t buy one).

February brought the usual events — St Valentine’s Day parties at the boys’ schools, for example (you have to give a card to everyone — seems to defeat the purpose to me); and the UM Micro-Soccer shoot-out (a three-on-three football tournament, played on a small-size pitch, with four players to each squad, each player obliged to play the same number of minutes — there are quite a few here over the year, this one, of course, was indoors). Gordon had played in a number of these tournaments, which bring together footballers from clubs all over south east Michigan, but Neil’s only experience to date had been a brief appearance as a “super sub”. For the UM tournament we formed an under-seven team, with Neil (age five) its youngest member, and, with the help of some great comebacks, not to mention my own very sophisticated coaching — “mark up!”, “get back!”, “move the ball!” — our Spitfires actually carried all before them. Neil scored some nice goals, and kept goal brilliantly in the Championship Match, blocking shot after shot in the final shift, as the Hawks, enraged at their defeat in the group match with us, strived to get back in the final after conceding early goals. The Spitfires celebrated victory enthusiastically, supported by pitch-invading fans representing families and team mates of older brothers. If you’ve ever been involved with young children in team sports, you’ll know just how thrilling moments like that can be. Hundreds of girls and boys participated in this tournament, and I’m pretty sure that Neil was the youngest player there, so I was especially proud of him. When it was revealed that the under-sevens only received “participation stickers”, even for winning their championship, Alina, supported by every other team mother, expressed her considerable displeasure to the UM men’s team head coach (who sat at the scorer’s table most of the day), but some judicious use of inside contacts eventually produced winners’ medals for Neil and his team mates. For Gordon, Neil’s victory was a slightly difficult pill to swallow, since his team was defeated in the semi-finals of the Under-Nine bracket. However, things got better for him later in the year, when his Super Blues won an outdoor three-a-side tournament at Ypsilanti (August) and the indoor Thanksgiving tournament at Wixom. Neil had no reason to complain either, since the Spitfires won the Under-Seven brackets at both tournaments. Our mantelpiece is now groaning with trophies (even if our bank balance is empty — the cost of these little tournaments is just the beginning of boy-sport expenses for the year).
Both boys also played on regular teams at our local indoor football facility all through the winter – Gordon’s Ann Arbor Arsenal team played a year up in the top Under-Ten division, where they were regularly overwhelmed physically, but rarely outplayed (it turned out to be good practice for the Western Suburban Soccer League Division One, to which they had been promoted for the outdoor spring season); Neil played two years up on a very talented under-eight team, and brought home another trophy.

Alina and I managed to cope with our teaching and, just about, with our sons through the spring. As usual, school demanded a certain amount of attention. Neil’s kindergarten class caused some anxiety – he seemed to be one of a group of less-than-well-behaved boys, and we had some concerns about his teacher (another familiar anxiety for the parents of small boys, I suspect), but, in the end, he managed fine. He loved his teacher, and had a number of proud moments, including his turn as “star of the week” (around the time of his birthday), when he got to show off his favourite foods (pel’meni and pancakes), activities (football and fishing), and achievements (winning the UM football tournament); his favourite objects, brought to school for his presentation, included his England kit.

Later in the winter Gordon played his indoor football out of town, at Novi (in the North West suburbs of Detroit), and this soon began to shape what passes for our social life. Our house is more or less on the way from Ann Arbor to Novi, so after Gordon’s Sunday matches, several team families began to accept our invitations to drop back to the Makin abode. By the end of the winter, we had a more or less firm group of friends, all tied to the boys’ football, with whom we socialized on a regular basis. Several seemed to associate the Makin house with rivers of inebriating liquids and large amounts of food (can’t think why). There were some very amusing incidents (disappearance of one parent to “sled” on our driveway; rat heading down trouser leg) and I have very fond memories of those winter gatherings.

With spring the boys’ football moved outside again. Modest success for Neil – we’ve found it hard to identify a good team and program for him – but more luck for Gordon, whose newly promoted team competed for the League Championship all season, before losing out by a single point. Although Gordon had an up and down season, he had some great moments, including scoring our last goal of the league season – a fine individual effort when he came out of midfield to beat three men before slotting home. If that goal had stood up, our team would have won a share of the Championship; unfortunately, it didn’t – we drew that match 1-1, lost 2-0 away to another big rival, and then drew 0-0 at home to a team from one of the two top clubs in the state (Gordon kept a first-half clean sheet): not quite enough for the Championship, but a great league season for the team. The biggest football highlight of the spring, however, came with our first tournament that took us out of the Detroit area – to Sylvania, Ohio, where the Pacesetter Invitational takes place every year on pitches that would credit a top-division professional club. After much planning and discussion of hotel options, most of the team families chose a modest hotel near Toledo with the key requirement of a pool, and headed down there for the weekend. We had a fun time with the other families, and Neil celebrated his birthday in style (falling asleep curled up in bed next to the young sister of a team mate of Gordon’s – we’ll be using that photograph against him when he gets older). Gordon’s team had to play three solid teams from Ohio, and then a team from the other of Michigan’s two top clubs (both of which
regularly make it to the national top twenty). Our team won its first three matches, and played this team – from Vardar (don’t ask me why a Michigan club is named after a club in Skopje, which, in turn, is named after Macedonia’s main river) – for the tournament championship. The result – a come-from-behind victory – was immensely satisfying to all the families, but my highlight was our first goal: Arsenal’s number seven (his number chosen in honour of the England captain) powering between Vardar’s centre backs to head home from a corner: only the team’s second headed goal, at a crucial moment, and, as its scorer repeatedly reminded us afterwards, put away “in traffic”. He beamed shyly at the kick-off after his goal, when I started singing “Alan Shearer, Alan Shearer, Alan Shearer, 1a, la-la-la-la-la!”. Earlier in the tournament, Gordon had also produced his best save of the season (everyone on the team is required to play a half in goal every few matches), diving far to his left to parry a shot behind. Since it was during a 17-0 victory, it was probably only noticed by his parents, but it still deserved the cry “Play up, Gordon Banks!” heard from the touchlines as he came to take the kick-off as an outfield player in the second half. That late spring weekend was undoubtedly one of the year’s highlights.

Such was the devotion to the team, that Alina and I even produced two fanzines, which are still available on the internet, if you’re really curious to learn more about the team (see the links at the end of this letter). Actually, it was quite fun doing a bit of amateur sports journalism, and it encouraged me to think again of the book I’ve planned on being an expatriate fan – I’ve written about 20,000 words, but don’t have a publisher yet (suggestions welcome). And lest our readers think that we’re uniquely obsessed with boy sport, I should add that all the other families on the team are pretty much the same. Moreover, since the beautiful game seems to cost us about $500 a month (that’s what the average appears to be, counting club fees, costs of indoor seasons, tournaments fees, travel to matches and practices – usually at least three a week – and hotel costs at tournaments), there’s surely no wonder that we talk about it so much…

Earlier in the Spring, Mrs Makin had celebrated her twenty-first birthday (again). Gordon, Neil, and I had plotted at great length, and decided that our ratophile wife and mother, who had spoken at length of her desire to see a cream-coloured rodent join the family, should get a surprise on the morning of her birthday. Two days before, we’d made the necessary trip to a Saline pet store, after locating the right coloured creature there in the course of lengthy phone calls to area pet stores. Our new baby had been hidden in a small-animal-carrier under Neil’s bed, and, on the morning of Alina’s birthday, we had prepared a breakfast tea and walked upstairs to wish her Many Happy Returns. As we approached with the tray, I asked Alina: «Ты хочешь Сливки к чаю?» (Literally, do you want cream (slivki) with your tea?), and, after receiving a lengthy lecture on how Russians never, ever take cream in their tea, I suggested that she rethink, and asked Neil to appear from behind my back, which he duly did, bearing a small cage with a beautiful, cream-coloured rat in it. Alina might be the only woman in Washtenaw County to get a rat for her birthday, and the only...
(When I celebrated my own twenty-first a few weeks ago, another rat chapter was written. Waking at five, because I had to drive Gordon to a tournament in Wixom which began shortly after six, I was greeted by my elder son hastily producing the same small-animal-carrier, with another addition, this one christened Ruby, inside. I was as glad as Alina.)

Other spring events included the boys’ birthdays and subsequent parties, celebrated with the usual energy and passion, and involving, of course, football. At Neil’s we learned that he had spent part of the term sending love letters to one of his guests, a certain Olivia, who, according to Neil, “dumped” him this term. He immediately took up with her best friend, now one of his four girlfriends (of whom one is thirteen; as far as I can tell, none of them actually know that they are his girlfriends). Gordon, however, is more circumspect – he used to like best a girl in his class who loves rats; now he likes her best friend, who shares his enthusiasm for reading (he demands new volumes of series that he likes as soon as they come out, so Gordon gets more hardbacks nowadays than we do: the new Harry Potter was devoured upon publication; His Dark Materials took him less than a month; and various other large books are devoured with remarkable speed and enthusiasm). Neil seems to get on well with everyone at school; Gordon already looks a bit of a loner, but he seems to manage fine. He has our lack of patience with stupidity, which makes him a marked man, of course. On the whole, he is happy to do his reading and play his football (which gets into everything: his class presentation on the news was about a tournament he played in, and when he had to write a sample para-

graph in which the most important thing had to come in the first sentence, he began his assignment, “The most important thing in soccer is first touch: it creates space, gives you time, and allows you to change the point of attack”: he really is a born midfielder!).

Alina escaped to Chicago for a spring weekend with Lisa Jones, mother of Gordon’s team mate Evan, and Neil’s team mate on the Spitfires Colin. We have it on good authority that they spent the entire weekend in museums.

At the end of the spring came one of the year’s great moments for Gordon, Neil, and me. We’d followed the UEFA Champions League with our usual passion, and, since Neil has an especial love for Liverpool, the Scousers’ improbable passage to the final had particular meaning for us (I still cheer for all teams from the North West, of course – family loyalty). I myself remember following in my campus office the text commentary on their final group match with Olimpiakos last December (I was supposedly grading or something), and thinking despondently as full time approached that they wouldn’t make it to the knock-out rounds, having conceded that early goal, and then refreshing my computer screen frantically as the comeback began and finally, astonishingly, was completed with Gerard’s “captain’s goal” in the 86th minute. After that we followed with joy and astonishment as they defeated the previous year’s champions of Germany, the current year’s champions of Italy, and the current year’s champions of England (what a tie that was), to face last year’s champions of Italy in Istanbul – has any club ever had to face a series of opponents of such quality? At every round the papers had predicted elimination, and here they were, competing for the biggest trophy a club in any sport could win, to all intents and purposes, the biggest trophy in any sport apart from the World Cup, while finishing fifth in the English league. So, on 25 May, I duly withdrew my sons from school early. In the absence books at Cornerstone and Wiley Schools, most of the early dismissals were for “dentist”, or “doctor”, or “family trip”. I wrote down: “UEFA Champions League Final”. Later that afternoon, Gordon was due at an Ann Arbor Arsenal practice, where he could expect to hear mostly of support for AC Milan (somehow, our attitudes to the Beautiful Game must get under everyone’s skin, because everyone cheers against England and against the clubs we cheer for). At half time the atmosphere in our house was about as glum as could be. I counselled the boys that we had to hope that Liverpool could avoid utter disgrace in the
second half. But that famous captain’s goal changed everything, and we watched with joy and amazement as a clearly inferior Liverpool team clawed its way back and held on. Gordon left for practice before extra time was over; Neil and I screamed in amazement as Dudek made the two point-blank saves from Shevchenko; and then we reached near hysteria as Liverpool kept their heads and Milan lost theirs in the shoot-out. A wonderful afternoon; I called Alina to let her know the final result (although I think I must have been almost totally incoherent – I certainly felt delirious: England with as many European Cups as Spain and Italy, and with more clubs sharing them – surely a sign of the strength of our game; only Milan and Madrid ahead of Liverpool in the all-time list -- how my father, who loved Liverpool’s last English championship, would have relished that). Gordon certainly enjoyed conveying the score to his team mates. Afterwards, I had to admit to myself that Milan had been the better team – and played well even after conceding the equalizer – but, as a Polish colleague and experienced football coach said to me, “anyone who comes from three goals back in the Champions League final deserves to win”. They did, and Neil might be a life-long Liverpool fan now.

We also followed England’s World Cup qualifying campaign, suffering the usual palpitations (losing to Northern Ireland!!) over the year, and enjoying the great relief of qualification and seeding. Of course, “football is a game that always ends in tears”, so we should know what to expect in Germany, but we can still hope. I’d love to be able to say that we’re heading to Germany ourselves in June, but that doesn’t seem very likely, despite many filial requests. However, both boys can name a pretty solid England lineup without much prompting, so they’re ready. And we did enjoy the victory over Argentina in that recent friendly.

For ITFC, however, it was, indeed, the usual tears last spring, and this season has been predictably disappointing. However, I was overjoyed for Southport – I followed with great pleasure that final day victory over Harrogate and the promotion back to the National Conference. Too bad that results have not gone well recently, and they look rather likely to go back down. How I’d like to see them back in the League some time soon, though. And what about Braintree Town – finally, an appearance in the first round proper of the FA Cup (don’t you love what the internet can do for you, even when you’re thousands of miles from home?!).

As summer approached, we had some pretty simple things on our minds: recover from teaching; get as much work done as possible; swim and fish (those last two priorities were Gordon and Neil’s). For the summer year in a row, no big European trip (they have become too exhausting with the boys now older and less amenable to doing just what we want), but some quiet family time here. Alina’s big task was to complete something which, up until now, has been revealed on a strictly need-to-know basis: an M.A. in Applied Linguistics, at the University of Leicester. For the last three years, she has been taking courses by distance learning, and this year she had to write her thesis (“Enhancing Grammar Learning Strategies of American University Students of Russian”). The previous modules of the degree had been completed with a series of stellar papers (after each of which this house saw a familiar ritual: “Alina, let me introduce you to these two small relatives of yours, Gordon and Neil; to our kitchen, where we cook dinner, to our laundry room, where we wash our clothes, and to these handy household utensils and appliances, with which we attempt to render our house less of a pig sty”). The research for this thesis had been completed – surveys designed and sent out, the background reading completed, the general argument constructed. But the thesis itself, which could have been submitted in the spring, had yet to appear in black and white. This was Alina’s task for the summer, and, despite a series of major and minor obstacles, it was completed. On the very last day for a summer submission, Alina went to Federal Express after a sleepless night, and sent in a thesis some 150 pages in length. We celebrated that night at an Ann Arbor restaurant, with friends from Gordon’s team, but Alina still wouldn’t say what we were celebrating, scared to jinx the thesis. She needn’t have worried. In November she received notice that she had passed with distinction. In other circumstances, we’d be heading to the UK for her graduation this January (read on to find out why we aren’t), but, in any case, it’s a great achievement: a further degree completed while in full time work (with no time off granted or other support), and a learned thesis written in a foreign language. Certainly one of the year’s great accomplishments, up there with Gordon and Neil’s best goals (and that’s saying something, believe me).

For me, the summer was quieter and the priorities simple: work on my articles (which I did), do research for the paper I planned to give in Russia this autumn (which I did), spend some time with the boys --
Travel, Russian style. The main road from Vytegra to Kargopol’ in October.

Fishing, playing tennis, heading off to farm markets and pick-your-own farms (which I did), planning my next book (which I did, sort of), and trying to relax a little bit (I’m always good at that).

For the boys, major highlights of the summer would probably include not only the tennis with an incompetent father, and the fishing at our favourite local spots, but also a series of sports camps. Gordon went to the UM football camp, and to the UM speed and agility camp, where he loved the agility drills and coped with being far from the fastest boy. Neil wanted to go to the Britannia Camp organized by our Arsenal Club and by Gordon’s (Scottish) coach Barry, so Alina decided to cut costs and add to her enjoyment by hosting a coach – they all come from the UK for the summer. That saves much of the cost of the camp, but Alina was picky: she demanded a good-looking, young, northern British coach. Craig, from St Mirren, duly arrived, and was the centre of attention from our boys and all their team mates and friends for the week the camp ran here. We also got to meet other young British footballers working their way across the States by coaching in Britannia camps. We had some very enjoyable evenings fishing, talking, barbecuing, and drinking beer with them, and have happy memories of the man whom Neil insisted on calling “my coach”.

Lest you think that only football dominates our sporting lives (and it is true that we subscribe to three football-only channels on satellite TV (three in the supposedly indifferent US, NB) and spend at least four evenings a week at boy practices and/or matches), I have to add that we greeted this summer’s Ashes victory with enormous celebration. At least, I did. Memories of my youth and the summer of Botham. Alina wouldn’t let me buy the satellite cricket package – probably wisely (there’d have been no work done at all this summer), so I just had Test Match Special on the internet, but that was a great return to my roots anyway.

Somehow, without any particular intention, we also found ourselves confronting, at long last, a problem with our house. Most homeowners pay great attention to the place where they live and into which they pour so much money, but I regret to say that, even though we love our house and its location on the edge of Stinchfield Woods – what a great place to work when you don’t have to be on campus – we haven’t really tended to things as we should. The most obvious sign of our neglect was the state of our siding – the boards all over the exterior of our house had begun an unexpected and very premature process of disintegration several years ago, and by this summer parts of our house were looking distinctly the worse for wear. Moreover, the state of the siding had led us to neglect the wood trim, too. In a burst of energy we got estimates from contractors, chose one, and awaited the beginning of a major transformation. In late August the crew arrived, and our peace ended as they bashed and banged, removing the old siding. “Two weeks” was the original timetable (of course). By late October, most of the work was finished, and our house certainly looks a lot better now (even if we are a lot poorer), but there are still things to be done, and we have a nasty feeling that we were too generous with our contractor, giving him most of his fee before he’d finished. We broke some cardinal rules there, but at least we like how our house looks. Of course, life in the woods takes it toll everywhere, and it looks like a new roof is called for, too. At least that shouldn’t cost as much. And we might be a bit more sensible with the next contractor.

Some readers may assume that Makin and Makin Landscaping, Heating, Cooling, Plumbing and Electrical must have gone out of business, but let me assure you that certain tasks were performed by us this year. I spent three hours on my back under the kitchen sink on the Sunday after Thanksgiv-
Building work. What a pleasure for the homeowner (true, a second trip to the hardware store was required); the same day I even took my life in my hands and changed a breaker on our breaker box. Nothing done about that hole at the front of our driveway, or the path to the front door, though, and no redecorating of the boys’ room. Yet.

But neither the house nor the M.A. is the main news story of the summer. As we recovered from teaching, Alina kept complaining that she felt a bit tired, a bit odd, and, a bit something else. By May, we had to confront the obvious and inevitable: an unexpected third young Makin was on the way. We blame it, at least a bit, on Gordon’s football – two Arsenal mothers have had babies in the last year; there’s clearly some special energy on the team. But I always wanted three children anyway, so, all being well, I will soon have three. When we had got over our shock (and come to terms with the prospect of four more years of day care – that’s the only down side of our biggest news this year), we were able to enjoy our delight. And Alina still finished her thesis – five months pregnant. Since we’ve always been pretty frank with Gordon and Neil, we had to face some direct questions this summer. We’ve also heard some very interesting explanations – Neil believes that if I slept in pyjamas, this wouldn’t have happened… Still, they seem excited and happy at the prospect of another sibling. They both went to the ultra sound, where Neil astonished the technician with his precise use of anatomical terminology. Alina had her team baby shower (at High Velocity Sports in Canton, during a match, of course: Gordon’s Arsenal team presented her with an eleven-four win, and Gordon scored two nice goals), and now seems to delivered Neil. The due date is 7 January – Russian Christmas. And, one more thing: it looks like another boy. The prospect of house demolition is terrifying. I’ve told Alina that we have a solid midfielder and an aggressive striker, so now I expect a centre back. Judging by the way Nigel (I was outvoted on names) is kicking, he’ll be clearing balls upfield like a young Tony Adams before he’s four. Keep your fingers crossed, and wish us the best.

Now you’ve got over the shock of that little piece of news, I’ll move smoothly into autumn. That season, too, was dominated by football. And Gordon’s team, now at the under-ten level, started the season slowly but ended it in fine style, winning the Western Suburban Soccer League First Division. In other words, they came top of a forty-team league, covering a significant part of Michigan’s eight million population. Gordon’s game strengthened over the season, and I thought he played especially well in the second half, as he has indoors since then. His coach has challenged Gordon, a natural midfielder (he has the best first touch on the team, and good vision, but little pace, and is on the small side) – playing him often at full back or sweeper, which Gordon, of course, objects to, but has managed surprisingly well. And he has also kept goal quite well on occasions. He regularly goes to the optional goalkeeping clinics, and tells me that he loves diving. Maybe he has some Italian blood. I missed the first two of the last four crucial matches, but heard that he played well in them, and I greatly enjoyed the final two games, when our major rival for the championship was defeated seven-two, and then the championship secured with an overwhelming eleven-three victory at Northville, where Gordon scored two and was driving on goal for his Champions!
third right at the end when he was shockingly fouled from behind. Fortunately, he managed enough self-control to celebrate with team mates (albeit while making rude gestures, behind his coach’s back, at the opponent who had brought him down). We drove back from Northville to Ann Arbor that morning, so Gordon and Neil could play their first indoor match of the autumn on one of the two teams they’ve each played on this session (!). Neil is by far the youngest player on that team with Gordon, and we’ve taken great pleasure in our younger son’s goals, scored against nine- and ten-year-olds twice his size, to the great consternation of opponents. Neil’s own goal celebrations (hand cupped to ear, running past the opposition families) are famous, but, fortunately, mostly not understood in Michigan.

The only respite from teaching and boy sport for me this autumn was my annual trip to the Klyuev symposium in Vytegra, northern Vologda province. It took a lot of persuading to get my very pregnant wife to release me (and to take care of our boys and their football, while also doing some of my teaching), but I did eventually get permission, and really enjoyed the trip, as I always do. I spent a lot of time with Vasya, who very kindly drove me to Vytegra in his brand-new Jeep Cherokee (a lot more comfortable than the overnight bus with no suspension). The transformation of Vasya and Natasha’s life in Petersburg with the growth of their business was truly eye-opening – I loved seeing the flat they’re remodeling, the transformed cottage, and the expansion of their chain of cafés. Success in the new Russia for some of my best friends – another highlight of the year. Seeing Gera reminded me of how much we missed him and Sveta, too. Vytegra and the symposium were fine, and I greatly enjoyed working on my paper (Klyuev and Mel’nikov-Pechersky – an author I’ve found very interesting). But the highlights of the trip were really simple – going to Vasya’s Lemovzhe cottage and fishing on the Luga early on the day after I arrived (catching nothing); seeing Vasya’s ever-expanding cottage and surrounding facilities – the massive carp pond to be, the fancy bath house, and so on; heading down a freezing canal at the South Eastern tip of Karelia, and out on to the river Murom, to visit the St Lazarus Monastery on Lake Onega, passing by the massive cranberry bog, where smoke from fires gave away the cranberry pickers, and having lunch at the fishermen’s settlement at the mouth of the river; on the way to the quay that morning, stopping at a beautiful wooden church, which stood out against the frozen ground and the clear morning sky, with the moon silently hanging over the tumble-down buildings.

I wish I could have told everyone in Vytegra that my Klyuev book had been accepted for publication, but I’m still looking. And my next book – not a monograph this time – is also still without a taker (but then, it’s not written yet). We’ll have to hope for the best. Meanwhile, Alina is keen to continue research on Second Language Acquisition – a much more lucrative line than mine, I have to say.

As ever, returning to teaching was hard after Vytegra, and the rest of the term has simply shot by with both of us terribly busy, and with Alina increasingly tired. She tells me that we’re now ready for the baby, but I’m sure I’m not (but I wasn’t the last time or the time before that, either). To judge from the vast quantities of baby items all over the house, we must be more or less prepared, though, and I picked up the “birthing pool” today. In fact, we’re both on leave next term, so things might be a bit easier than we could have expected, although at my advanced age nothing comes easy. Still, keep your fingers crossed for us.
With Nigel on the way (of course, it could still be Lizzie, whatever they said at the ultra-sound), our Thanksgiving was very quiet, although the next day we went – of course – to a football tournament. This Christmas and New Year will be equally quiet.

I suppose Nigel also has something to do with this letter being completed so late, but the main reason is total family exhaustion after the term. We’re still not ready for Christmas, but, like Nigel, it will be here very soon. As soon as teaching was over, we did make an effort for the boys: I took Slivki, Snuffles, and Ruby to school for Neil to “show and share” (sadly, our much loved Missie died of old age last month) and all his class mates loved them; Alina gave a presentation on bread in Russian culture and I did something on scones for the bread module in his class (while we have our concerns with Dexter schools, there is lots of imaginative teaching); and I’ve agreed that Gordon will have a rat day at school soon, too. Neil loves his show-and-share sessions: at an earlier event he took his toy Blue Jays, and explained, with the help of a field guide, that they were members of the Crow family (to the surprise of some less-taxonomically-informed families). However, his first choice for that session was a Victoria’s Secret catalogue he’d found. Fortunately, I dissuaded him. In a couple of days the boys will be home, and there’ll be no peace and quiet, but we still plan to have a good break, and be ready for the big event. Of course, there’ll be some football, too.

And that seems to be our year – an interesting, demanding, largely fulfilling and enjoyable year, with major changes in prospect.

When asked to name highlights for the year, we came up with the following lists (in no particular order):

**Alina** – expecting Baby Nigel; seeing the Spitfires winning their tournaments; going to Chicago with Lisa; completing her M.A.; Gordon’s headed goal against Vardar; Gordon’s team winning the League Championship; playing with our rats.

**Neil** – Snufflie Rat, Slivki Rat, and Ruby Rat; scoring against under-tens for Team USA; winning three small-sided tournaments; fishing in the summer.

**Gordon** – making the top Arsenal team for a second year; winning WSSL with that team; winning small-sided tournaments; the match against Vardar and his headed goal; all the great books he’s read this year, especially Eregon; Snufflie Rat, Slivki Rat, and Ruby Rat; Liverpool winning the Champions’ League; Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.

**Michael** – Gordon’s team winning WSSL; Neil’s tournament victories; fishing and going to farm markets and pick-your-own places with the boys this summer; expecting Baby Nigel; seeing a few publications come out, and writing a few articles; giving Alina Slivki for her birthday; seeing Alina finish her M.A. thesis and have it accorded a “distinction”; Liverpool winning the Champions’ League; going to Russia and seeing Vasya, Natasha, and Gera, as well as those trips out of Vytegra in Vasya’s brand-new Jeep; and, finally, a small magical moment -- a few days before going to Russia, watching Michigan play (and lose to) Indiana, and then taking a ball out on to the pitch and knocking it about with Gordon, hoping that no UM players were watching, but taking enormous pleasure in my son’s joy and skill.

That leaves me just to wish you all the very best for Christmas and the New Year, or for New Year and Christmas, or just for New Year, depending on where you live and what you believe. We hope that all our friends are happy, healthy, and joyful, and that we’ll see as many as possible in the next twelve months.

With much love, Michael, Alina, Gordon, and Neil (and Tikhon, Stasik, Friendsie, Snuffles, Slivki, and Ruby).

Want to read all of these efforts, and to see the “Sports Reports from Dexter” (with links to lots of photographs), or to read the two fanzines we produced for Gordon’s team? Go to http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mlmakin/FamilyArchive/. But bear in mind that many of these items are quite large – use a fast connection; it will take for ever to download most of them on dialup.