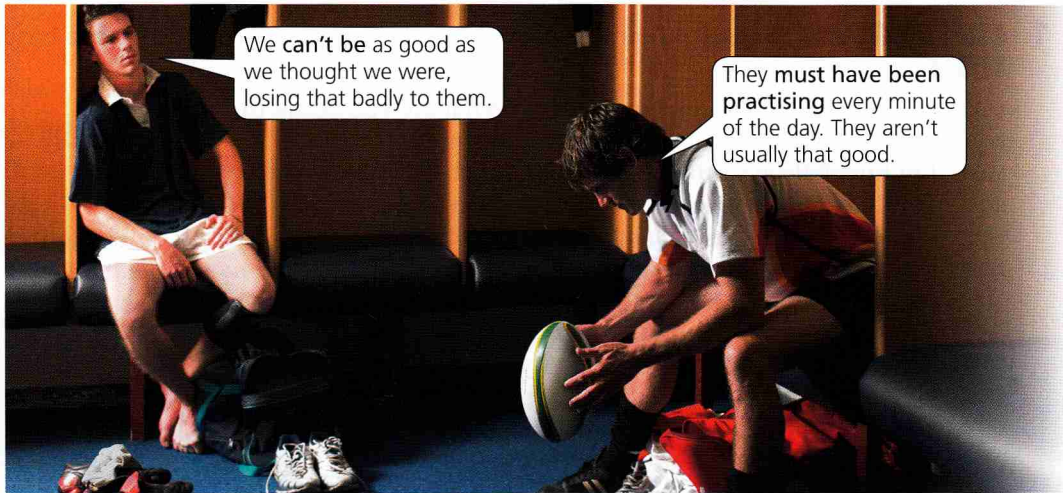# 32 Speculation and expectation

1 Present speculation

When we speculate (or make deductions), we make informed guesses about an action or situation. We use a modal followed by the infinitive of a main verb in the simple or continuous form.

If we strongly believe that something is true, usually because we have evidence, we use *must* or *have got to*:
*This **must be** the place – it's the only restaurant in the street.*
*You **must be feeling** tired after your flight. Why don't you rest for a while?*

We use *have (got) to* when we want to add emphasis:
*There **has (got) to be** some mistake. I didn't order this furniture.*
*You **have got to be joking**! That was not a foul!*

If we strongly believe that something is NOT true, or is impossible, we use *can't* or *couldn't*:
*He **can't/couldn't be** the senior doctor, he's far too young.* (= I'm certain he isn't …)
*Sarah **can't be working** at the moment – I see her in the garden every morning.*

⚠ We do not use *mustn't* in this sense:
✗ *This mustn't be the place – there's no one inside and there are no lights on.*
✓ *This **can't be** the place – there's no one inside and there are no lights on.*

We also use *can* and *could* in *wh-* questions or with adverbs such as *only* or *hardly*:
✗ *Who may that be at this time of night?*
✓ *Who **can/could** that **be** at this time of night?*
*It **can/could hardly be** the postman. He only comes in the morning.*
(= I don't think it is the postman.)
*It **can/could only be** Steve. He's the only one with a key.* (= I'm sure it is Steve.)

If we believe that something is possible or probable, we use *could*, *may* and *might*
(➤ Unit 31.1):
*He always wears smart suits. He **could be** a businessman.*
*'Why isn't she here yet?' 'I don't know. The train **may be running** late.'*

We use *might* for tentative (less direct) questions:
***Might** the losses **be** due to currency fluctuations?*

In informal speech we can make the speculation stronger by adding *well*:
*Let's call the hospital. There **may well** be some news now.*

We also use *couldn't* to say that something is unimaginable because we are unwilling to do it: *I **couldn't pick up** a spider; they terrify me.*