

## The Scout

Ronan knew a Premier League scout was in the crowd. His coach had warned him about it. He also knew that it wasn't just *any* scout from *any* team: it was a United scout.

Ronan played for a well known boys' team near Dublin. In the past twenty years, six boys had gone from playing for his team to representing the Republic of Ireland in the World Cup.

And even more were playing in the Premier League and Championship in England.

Ronan had had a good game. He had passed and tackled and crossed the ball as well as he could. But was that good enough?

He couldn't be sure.

But *now* he had a chance to make his mark on the match.

His team had a penalty.

A last minute penalty.

And, with the match at 2-2, he could win the game and get spotted by the scout.

*If* he scored.

Ronan placed the ball on the penalty spot, scanning the crowd for the scout as he did so. He imagined the scout would be an older man. He might look athletic. But he would probably have grey hair. Or maybe he was younger. He didn't have to be old. It could even be a woman. Why was he assuming it was a man?

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When the referee blew his whistle for a second time, Ronan was shocked from his thoughts. He'd almost forgotten to *take* the penalty he was so worried about who the scout might be.

He stepped up to the penalty spot and drove the ball hard towards the bottom left corner of the goal. That was where he always put penalties.

He'd hit the shot well and was happy – until he saw the keeper stretching his arm out and palming the ball round the post.

The keeper has saved it: Ronan had missed the penalty.

Time stood still.

Ronan closed his eyes.

Had he blown his chance of a trial at United?

But then, from nowhere, he heard a voice in his head urging him on. *There's still time to win the game*, it said. *Forget about the scout*.

So Ronan ran behind the goal and grabbed the ball where it had stopped in some long grass. Then he glanced at the referee, to see if he was about to blow the final whistle.

The man in black seemed ready to end the game, but when he saw Ronan move, he put the whistle to his side.

*Time to take a corner*, the voice said to Ronan.

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So Ronan placed the ball by the corner flag, stepped back in three long strides and swung the ball deep into the box.

He knew who would be on the end of the ball.  
His best friend, Connor.

Connor was a brilliant striker. And he always knew how to read the flight of the ball and be on the end of it.

Ronan watched as Connor leapt up above all the defenders and headed the ball into the back of the net.

Gooooaaaaa!

3-2.

A last-gasp winner.

Now the referee blew the final whistle.

After the game a man in a long dark coat and brown hair came over to Ronan and Connor.

'I'm Sam Beckett,' the man said. 'I'm a scout for United.'

Ronan said nothing.

Connor said nothing.

What was the scout going to say?

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'I'd like to offer you a trial at United, young man,' he said, facing Connor. 'That was a fine header at the end. And your overall play was superb.'

Ronan smiled. At least Connor had a trial at United. He knew *he'd* blown it, but he was happy for his friend.

'And you,' the scout turned to Ronan. 'You missed a penalty...'

Ronan looked down. He knew he had been stupid not concentrating when he should have been during the game. And he knew what was coming next.

Except he was wrong.

'... but the way you reacted so quickly,' Mr Beckett went on, 'the way you recovered from the miss to take that corner... You're the kind of player we're looking for. I'd like to offer you a trial too.'

Ronan looked at Connor.

Connor looked at Ronan.

They both grinned.

They were about to start an adventure of a lifetime.

**Ronan and Connor did well at their trial in England and were asked to join Premier League United. Read about how they get on in Tom Palmer's six-book *Football Academy* series, published by Puffin Books. Free first chapters of all Tom's books are available at [www.tompalmer.co.uk](http://www.tompalmer.co.uk).**

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