

Football book reviews

Here is a selection of reviews of football books that publishers have sent to us. The reviews are short and give an idea of what the book is about and its appropriate age group.

The books have been reviewed by Tom Palmer, author of Puffin's *Foul Play* and *Football Academy* books. He and his daughter have chosen a top five from the dozens of books they have read. They are:

Jake Cake and the Football Beast by Michael Broad
Keeper by Mal Peet
Cinderboy by Laurence Anholt
Usborne Activities: Football Sticker Book
Come on Danny by Andy Croft

Tom can't review his own books, so – for your information – he is the author of two series for Puffin. The *Foul Play* books (*Foul Play*, *Dead Ball & Off Side*) are about Danny, a 14 year old boy who tries to solve football crimes. His *Football Academy* series are about an under-twelve academy side at a Premier League club.

BOOKS FOR 0-5 YEAR OLDS

Noisy Noisy Footballers (Ladybird)

A book that has a colourful image on hard card with a couple of words about football on each page, each covering a different aspect of football. The crowd. The shot. The save. The goal. The half time oranges. The best thing about the book is the button on each page that emits a child-thrilling noise – the whistle, the roar of the crowd, the thud of the ball. It helped me indoctrinate my daughter into football and – arguably – helped prepare her for her first trip to a match. Very good.

Big Kicks by Bob Kolar (Walker) –

This is a picture book about a bear who does not like football. He is persuaded to play by his friends, a rabbit, a dog, etc. He is worried, but eventually starts to enjoy it and begins to do well. The pictures in this book are lovely. Wittily drawn. Lots of fun. A book about friends supporting friends – and teamwork.

Goal by Mina Javaherbin (Walker)

A group of younger boys play football (with a rare quality ball, their prize possession) in their South African township. When bigger boys come to steal their ball, the boys avoid tragedy by hiding the best ball and letting the bigger boys steal a no-good ball. Lovely pictures. The moral – team up to beat the bullies.

***Harry and the Dinosaurs United* by Ian Whybrow (Puffin)**

Harry is in the school team, but it does not go well immediately. So the dinosaurs come out of their bucket to help him. As a result he learns teamwork and his team turn things round. A nice way to get very young children into football – and books, of course.

BOOKS FOR 6-10 YEAR OLDS

***The Hat Trick* by Terry Deary (Barrington Stoke)**

There are lots of football stories about teams being 2-0 down and someone coming on to score a hat trick. But this one is different. There's a twist in the tail that makes the book well worth reading. It is a short read and is well illustrated. My six year old daughter read it in one sitting and raved about the ending. The highlights are the dad character, leading to a great father-child relationship. Barrington Stoke books rarely disappoint. And this one will go down well because pretty much every school child knows who Terry Deary, the author, is.

***Jake Cake and the Football Beast* by Michael Broad (Puffin)**

Jake Cake is a brilliant character who tells stories that no-one else would believe. Except us, the reader. Jake is in the local football team. But he's not so good. So he practices on his own. That's when he meets the football beast. Bigfoot. Bigfoot helps Jake to become a better player, he chases off the shark mascot of the other team and everything turns out pretty well. The stories are illustrated by the author. They are funny and clever.

***Girls FC* by Helena Pielichaty (Walker)**

Girls FC is a great series about girls playing football. Helena Pielichaty knows what she is writing about. Her daughter plays for West Brom ladies. Each book is about a different girl in the team, but they all feature along the way. The stories are funny, sad, moral and often surprising. I have met lots of girls who have read these and love them. Boys too.

***Football Fever* by Sophie Smiley (Andresen Press)**

Three football stories in one – about a family of children who play football. This book reminded me of Shirley Hughes' books. Gentle. From a child's point of view. One of the children is a Down's Syndrome boy. He gets a lot of stick from other children in one of the stories. His siblings stick up for him. These stories are about teamwork.

***Dream On* by Bali Rai (Barrington Stoke)**

Baljit works in his dad's chip shop. But that is not the extent of his dreams. He wants – naturally – to be a footballer. So in a classic father-versus-son story, Baljit tries to make his dreams come true. To become a professional footballer. This is an easy-to-read Barrington Stoke story for older children. The themes are aimed at 11+, but the reading age is more like 8+.

***The Fix* by Sophie McKenzie (Barrington Stoke)**

Sophie McKenzie is a great children's writer. Her football story starts with two boys breaking into a football stadium and ends with a bribery scandal. Edgy, as you'd expect, it is a great story about a boy's moral quandary. What is the right thing to do? Blake gets himself into a mess that means he is dragged in deep with a menacing man who seems capable of the worst things. Should he try to protect his mum OR should he play for the team? A tricky dilemma that gets you snatching at pages to the end.

***DK Eyewitness Football* (Dorling Kindersley)**

As with all DK's eyewitness books, this is well-illustrated and has clear and concise text. There are lots of facts about football's history, how to play the game and the World Cup. There is also a very useful CD containing free football clip art. One for children who already know a bit about the game.

***Dino FC series* – Keith Brumpton (Usbourne)**

A group of dinosaurs feature in the first two books of Dino FC, *The Missing Fans* and *Terror on the Training Ground*. Good for young readers with a passion for dinosaurs.

***Rainbow Magic: Francesca the Football Fairy* by Daisy Meadows (Orchard)**

Kirsty and Rachel are taking on the goblins and Jack Frost, in a bid to help the rainbow fairies. But the goblins are trying to spoil things in the stadium and, before, on the coach to the game. My daughter – six – rates this as one of her favourite books. And I like it too.

Cinderboy by Laurence Anholt (Orchard)

A re-telling of the Cinderella story, where the ball is round and a football match is the ball... if that makes sense. Cinders is a downtrodden boy. His brothers (ugly) and nasty step dad get to go to the cup final. He doesn't. Until he gets invited to play. Funny illustrations, a familiar story subverted and a simple but effective style make this one of the best young football novels around.

The Football Series by Jim Kelman (Wayland)

The Football series by Jim Kelman is a set of four books that feature different aspects of the game: *Teamwork*, *Rules of the Game* and *Tactics*. You will find this series in most public libraries. They have great images, facts and details that are aimed at beginners. The text is simple and laid out in short chunks. A good introduction.

Football Focus Series by Clive Gifford (Wayland)

Much like the above series, but there is more depth to the books and the range of titles, the Football Focus books include the books *Teamwork & Tactics*, *Players & Skills*, *Rules of the Game* and *The Business of Football*. Very readable. Basic, but interesting. And more quirky subjects than the series above.

Usborne Activities: Football Sticker Book

This book has several football scenes – on and off the pitch – that your child can stick stickers onto. Each scene has its own stickers. There is a bus top victory parade. Beach soccer. Fans on the terraces. But for me, this book was fantastic because it let me sit down with my daughter and teach her about football. For instance, one scene was a corner kick. Together we put the defenders and forwards in position, then the corner taker and ball. It really helped me teach her how aspects of the game work. You may pity my daughter, but I promise you she wanted to do this book every night for a week. Hurray!

Angels FC series by Michael Coleman

There are a lot of football series for under-tens. A team of characters. Lots of testing situations for them to work through as a team together. Some are good, some are poor. *Angels FC* is excellent. There are three stories per book, each a tidy half-hour bedtime read. The stories are clear, funny, engaging and have great characters. The team are coached by the local vicar, explaining their name. Choose from the alliterative *Touchline Terror*, *Dazzling Dribbling*, *Awesome Attacking*, *Squabbling Squads* and *Shocking Shooting*. Good covers too.

Soccer Squad by Bali Rai (Red Fox)

A youth club football team is formed, then takes on all-comers. This is a story about boys and how they get on. It is well written, often tense and the characters are engaging.

Stadium School (A&C Black)

A football series set at a football boarding school by a mother and son pairing. A group of football hopefuls come together to compete against each other, then other teams, to be part of this elite academy. The three titles available are: *On the Spot*, *Hot Prospect* and *Long Shot*.

The Team Series by David Bedford (Little Hare)

This is a well-written series of stories about a group of footballing children and their robot. The stories are light and funny with lots of dialogue. They take up scenarios children will face in real life.

BOOKS FOR 10+ READERS OVER 10 YEARS OLD

Striker Boy by Jonny Zucker (Frances Lincoln)

Striker Boy is about Nat Dixon, a thirteen year old boy who ends up playing for a Premier League team. Every boy's dream. So, if they can live that dream on their PlayStations, why not in a book? During 330 pages of action, Zucker tells the story of Nat's rise to fame and the crisis at the club he plays for. Long, but good for a confident reader.

Mal Peet's *Keeper*, *Penalty* and *Exposure* (Walker)

Mal Peet is the king of football fiction.

Keeper is about a fictional Brazil goalie who is taught to be a keeper by a ghost of a goalie. Based in the rainforest, it is also about deforestation, South America and football.

Penalty features the same main character, a sports journalist who is investigating strange witchcraft-style events going on around a young footballer.

Exposure is a retelling of Othello through football. But it is much more than that. It is about how a young man deals with celebrity and how his hangers on destroy him.

All three are magnificent. Not for reluctant readers, like many football novels, as the stories are very rich and complex. As spectacular as watching Brazil circa 1970.

***Match of Death* by Jim Riordan (Oxford)**

The story of the WW2 Ukrainian team who were forced to play the occupying Nazi's in a football game meant to show the dominance of the Germans. All they had to do was lose. And, if they won, they would be shot. This is a story from the point of view of two young people, who, as well as being involved in this game, lose their parents and their home. Told by a man who knows his subject, as he once played professional football in the USSR. Very good.

***Bend it Like Beckham* by Narinder Dhani (Hodder)**

One of the few films about football to be respected, *Bend it Like Beckham* is well known. The film is good – and the book is too. A girl from an Asian family wants to play football. But her dad is not keen. They argue. She plays anyway. He finds out. And then...Well, you'll have to read it. I ask children who have read/seen both the book and the film which they like best. They normally choose the book.

***Come on Danny* by Andy Croft (Barrington Stoke)**

This book is devastatingly good. Danny is a bright lad, but his family and friends are dragging him down. His mum goes from one man to the next, ignoring her son. His dad is in prison and he has not been allowed to see him for years. Danny stands out. So he acts dumb. He does stupid things. Only on the pitch can he express himself. Then he hears a voice while he's playing. Hard hitting with drinking, references to drugs. But the perfect Barrington Stoke book, written in a very basic language. But beautifully put together all the same. Wonderful!

***The Beautiful Game* series by Narinder Dhani (Orchard)**

A great series about teenage girls playing football and forging friendships. Stories focus on the girls' relationships, their families and playing football. Titles include *Georgie's war*, *Golden Girl Grace*, *Hannah's Secret* & *Lauren's Best Friend*.