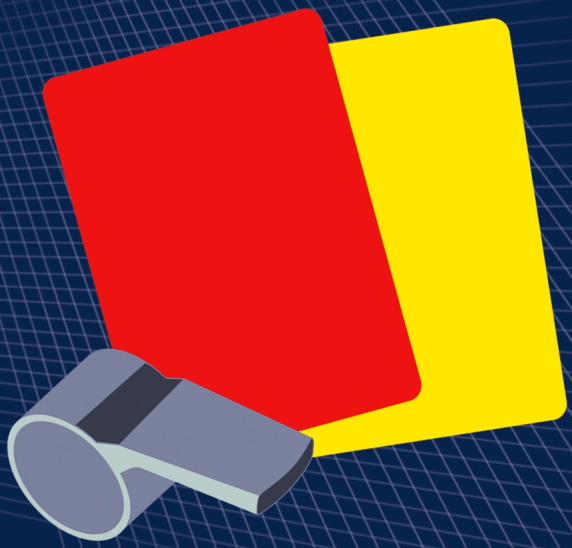
JOHN HICKMAN



THE FOOTBALL TRIALS

DANGEROUS PLAY

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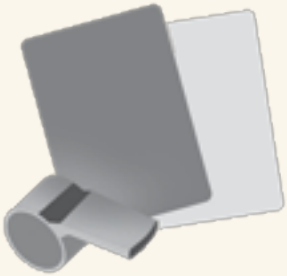
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Catch Up is a charity which aims to address the problem of underachievement that has its roots in literacy and numeracy difficulties.

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Illustrated by NEIL EVANS

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Lauren Fox

I look down at the ball at my feet. I don't need to look up at the goal; I already know where that is. Then I hit the ball. Hard and low, right across the keeper. It smashes against the post and into the net.



That's the hat-trick! The lads crowd around me and I'm absolutely buzzing.

After the game, even the Sunderland players congratulate me and Liam, my coach at United, throws his arm around me. "You keep playing like that," he tells me, "and the gaffer will have you in that first team in no time."

I still can't believe I play for United. It's only been a month since I signed schoolboy forms. It's unreal. Can you imagine? Me, playing in the Premier League? How amazing is that? But Liam is always banging on about how hard it is, how only the best players can make it and how we all need to get ourselves a proper education.

Life isn't that different. Other than getting double the homework – from school and United.

I have to do football training drills at home, whenever I get the chance. Plus I have to watch my diet. I've never eaten so many vegetables. Mum doesn't mind; she's been trying to get greens down me since I was little. Granddad keeps saying he's going to turn into a rabbit!

Mum and Granddad are waiting at the side of the pitch for me.

"Well done, Jackson," says Mum and she has this huge smile on her face.

"Just the three goals today then?" says Granddad.

"Didn't want to embarrass them," I tell him.

"You were totally brilliant," says Mum.

"All right, Mum, calm down," I tell her.

Ryan jogs over. "Are you going to Wheeler's place later?" he asks me.

"Definitely," I tell him.

"Sweet," he says. He nods at Granddad and jogs off.

"Partying tonight then?" asks Mum.

"If that's OK?" I ask.

"I think you've earned it," says Granddad.

After the game, I set off for Wheeler's place for the party. My head is still buzzing from the match. I give Wheeler's door a loud knock. Wheeler answers. "What's with all the banging? Thought you were the police!" he says.

In the living room, Ollie, Ryan, Jamal and Zeki from the academy are playing a footie game on the console.

"Ollie beating you again?" I ask Ryan.

"What do you think?" he answers.

Ollie grins at me. "Can't help being awesome," he says.

"Want a drink?" Wheeler asks me. "There's some cola in the fridge."

I grab a can, go back into the living room and watch Ollie score a worldie against Ryan.

Everyone is laughing when there's a knock at the door.

"Who could that be?" asks Wheeler, looking all shifty. He goes to the door.

After a moment, Amy from school comes in. Then Jade. The last girl through the door is Lauren Fox. My heart stops. What's she doing here?

I've had a thing for Lauren Fox since I knew what a "thing" was. I've known her since infant school. Our mums are friends and she used to come over and watch DVDs, and try and sit next to me on the settee. I didn't like it. I liked robots and dinosaurs and robot dinosaurs. Not girls. I thought girls had germs.

So whenever she sat next to me, I would get up and sit somewhere else. Then she would come and sit next to me again. And I would move again. I would pay money to have her sit next to me now though.

Everything about her is on point. Her hair is really dark, bobbed on one side and shaved down on the other. She's got these big brown sparkly eyes that I could stare into all day long.

She has a cute little stud in her nose. And an amazing smile. I mean, when she smiles, it's like she just lights up and my insides turn to goo. She's like the perfect combination of cool and cute and hot and...

"Jax man, stop staring," says Wheeler and drags me into the kitchen. He pulls open the fridge door and yanks out another can of cola.

"You never said Lauren was coming," I whisper.

"She isn't going out with Forest any more," he says.

My heart thuds. I'm not sure whether this is even better news than signing for United. "Since when?" I ask.

"Since... last week, I think," he says. "Are you going to ask her out?"

"OK, two problems," I say. "One. She would laugh at me. Two. What about Forest?"

"One. She wouldn't laugh," says Wheeler. "Two. Forget Forest."

"Like I can forget Forest," I say. "He would kill me."

"Here." He hands me another can. "We're going to talk to Lauren."