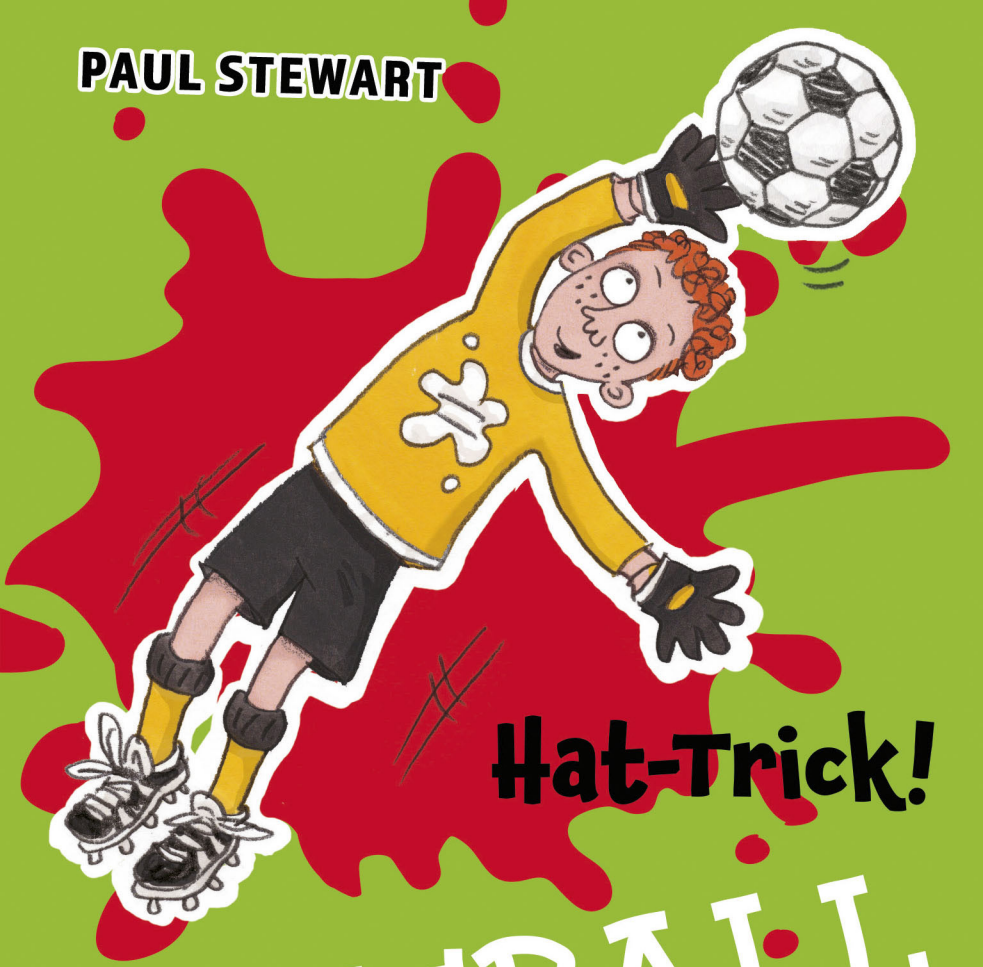
PAUL STEWART



Hat-Trick!

FOOTBALL MAD

3

Illustrated by
Michael Broad

Hat-Trick!



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For Anna and Rich



Chapter 1

"Oi, Thompson!" someone shouted from the touchline.

Danny Thompson froze. It was Mr Carlton, sports teacher and team coach, doing the shouting. Was he about to say that Danny could have got to the ball? No way! He was nowhere near it! Then again, Danny thought glumly, the man was always picking on him.

"Who do you think you are, Thompson?" he bellowed. "Cinderella?"

"Sir?" said Danny, his face turning red.

"You keep running away from the ball, lad!" he shouted.

The opposition team all sniggered.

At the other end of the pitch, Scott Marley groaned. As captain, it was his job to keep spirits high. At 1–0 down and with only ten minutes of the match remaining, the Dale players were already feeling bad. And having their own coach taking the mickey was not helping.

To stand any chance of winning the Langton Town Junior Cup, Dale had to draw with Redwood at the very least. But that equalising goal was hard to get – and the final minutes of the game were ticking away.

As Under 10s and Under 11s, Scott, Danny, Jack and the rest had won the cup for Dale two years in a row. Now, as Under-12 Seniors, it was the last time the team could enter the competition.



The matches had been hard fought all season. Dale were sharing the lead position in their group. If they did get through to the final – and win! – then, as three-time champions, the cup would be theirs to keep.

For ever.

A hat-trick!

The trouble was, Redwood were playing the game of their lives. They'd do anything to stop Dale. They had scored a lucky goal in the 24th minute, and now they were holding on to their lead. No matter what Dale tried, a Redwood player was always there – every move, every set piece, every charge at goal was closed down.

Scott looked at his watch. Five minutes to go. Victory was out of the question, and the draw they needed was looking less and less likely. Then, suddenly, all that changed.

"Foul!" Luke Edwards shouted as the Redwood number 5 sent Max Novak flying.

The whistle blew for a free kick.

"Yes," Scott muttered.

He frowned. This was likely to be their last chance to save the match. He nodded to Jack. It was time to try out one of those special set pieces they'd been practising.

Jack and Scott stepped away from the ball. Then Jack ran up, drew back his foot – and jumped to the left. As he did so, Scott rushed forwards and booted the ball hard.

The shot was a beaut. It whistled over the players in the wall and across to the right wing, where Luke was already racing up to meet it. All the defenders were so far forward that he was soon past them.



"Go on!" Scott bellowed as Luke got on top of the ball and flicked it forwards.

Danny was still stinging from Mr Carlton's remarks. He watched grimly as Redwood's goalie dashed out of his area and ran towards the attacker. Although he was playing in defence, Danny was a natural goalkeeper. He'd always played in goal for the team – until Mr Carlton had insisted that Ricky Baker replace him.

"That's it, Luke," Danny muttered. "Take it easy ..."

At that moment, Luke nudged the ball forward, then blasted it with everything he had. The ball rose. Everything went quiet.

The goalie leaped up in a desperate attempt to deflect the ball, but it flew past his fingers. The Dale team held their breath. Would the curving shot find the goal or was it doomed to

speed past the far post for a goal kick – and certain defeat?

A split second later, their questions were answered.

"YEAH!" roared the Dale supporters as the ball clipped the inside of the post and spun into the goal.



Luke fell to his knees, hands clasped together. The rest of the team gathered round him.

"Brilliant, mate!" Scott said.

"Fantastic goal!" said Jack.

"Amazing!" "Tremendous!" "Ace!" The compliments came thick and fast.

Redwood kicked off again, but the ball hadn't even left the centre circle when the ref blew the final whistle. As the teams made their way

back to the changing rooms, the Dale players had never been so happy.

1–1. They were still in the competition.