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With thanks to Gail Newsham,
official archivist of the Dick, Kerr Ladies football team.

Dick, Kerr Girls All Together Now is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

First published in the UK 2022

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Cover artwork © Thy Buy 2022

978-1912979-72-1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 11.5/18pt Kingfisher by Amy Cooper

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Dedicated to all the girls who have,
and who continue to push boundaries,
fight inequality and strive for more.
Empowered girls empower girls.

December 1920



The time was coming. I could hardly believe it.

I stared at myself in the dusty mirror that stood at the back of mine and my sister Hettie's bedroom. The glass was all smudged and there was a tiny crack that ran down the bottom left-hand corner, but I could still see my face well enough. I could make out my body, all bony and pale, as I stood awkwardly, one hand resting on my hip. I hoped Hettie was right, that I was getting taller. I had been making myself eat all of Mam's hearty dinners in the hope that I would grow quickly.

I pulled a face at my reflection, sticking out my tongue and crossing my eyes. I looked so daft, so young still. Was anyone going to take me seriously?

'Not if you keep acting like a ninny, Martha lass . . .' I muttered to myself. 'You'll have to stop this larking around and act more sensible, like Hettie. You need to be more like her.'

I straightened my features, pulled back my

shoulders and stared at myself again. Who would have thought it? Silly old Martha was going to get her time with the Dick, Kerr Girls football team. Maybe, at last, I could show everyone what I was capable of.

I was wearing Freddie's old shorts, the same ones that Hettie used to wear when she'd played for the Dick, Kerr Girls. They hung on me like deflated balloons. The bottoms were frayed and Mam'd had to stitch up a tear along the side, but they would still do me a turn.

The stripy top was oversized and swamped me like a shapeless tent. It was one of the girls' old ones. I didn't know whose, but I'd like to think it was one of the important players like Alice Kell or Flo Redford. Wouldn't that be a thing? Surely it would bring me luck! In all honesty, it was too old and tatty to be worn for games but was perfectly all right for me to wear at training. I stared down at the stripes, faded with wear. If I ever got to play a proper game, I would be given a little cap too. It would sit neatly on my head and finish off the look perfectly.

My legs were covered by huge dark socks, again, old ones of Freddie's; they itched against my skin and the rough darning felt uncomfortable and stiff

against my toes, but at least they covered some of the bruises that were dotted across my legs. I wiggled to try and get used to the feeling.

I stood back a little and puffed out my chest.

Could I really do this? Could I really dare to believe that I could one day be a Dick, Kerr football player?

'You *can* do this, Martha,' I told myself, my voice strong and loud now. 'You know you can.'

After all, this was what I had wanted for so long.

It was an evening in early December, and I was outside on the street playing football again. I had to take advantage of every opportunity to get my practice in. I needed to get better if I was to be as good as the players in the Dick, Kerr team. I didn't dare turn up to training looking less than ready.

It was getting late, but I didn't care. I ignored the icy feeling in my battered boots; I refused to take notice of the deep ache in my legs as I moved. I was outside. I was playing. That was all that mattered.

And I had to win. I had to beat the boys.

'Martha! Martha! Over here!'

I moved across the cobbles, the ball stuck to my boot like it was glued. I only had to look up quickly,

but I knew I'd left Davey on his backside. That lad was far too slow. Up ahead, Ronnie called again, waving his hands in the air, his face all puffed out and red. It made me want to giggle. He looked so daft.

I kept on moving. Our makeshift tin-can goalposts were within my reach. Feeling the bubble of excitement rise inside of me, I lofted the ball clear in the air, watching as it curled . . .

Would it make it?

My breath spilt out of me, leaving a whisper of smoke in the chilly air. I leant forward, my hands on my knees, my chest puffing hard.

The ball seemed to move at slow speed. The curl was almost perfect. I watched and waited as it drifted towards the target and then suddenly, stubbornly, struck the right-hand tin and rattled off behind for a goal kick.

'Martha!' Ronnie roared. 'You should've passed!'

I glared at him. 'I only just missed it, didn't I?'

'You still should've passed. You know that.' He glared back at me, his funny red face glowing. He swatted at his messy hair, his eyes blazing with frustration. 'It's not been the same. You've not been the same. Ever since . . .'

'Ever since what?'

'You know what,' he shot back, trudging over to collect his ball. 'Ever since you heard you'd be training with the Dick, Kerr Girls you think you're better than us.'

'I don't!' I shouted. 'But I can't help wanting to do well. I know I can be even better.'

He didn't even bother to turn round. 'You go on thinking like that, Martha,' he said. 'Go on. You're not even that good. Not really. I'm surprised your big head doesn't slow you right down.'

I charged after him. 'Why do you say that, Ronnie? Eh?'

Behind me, I could hear Davey, his breath catching, ragged in his throat. 'Hey! Don't be a daft apeth, Martha. Ronnie was only larking about.'

I shook my head. I could feel bubbles of rage spilling out of me, turning into hot sparks. 'I'll not have Ronnie talk like that about me. Just because he's as slow as a slug, he thinks he can say nasty things to me.' I paused, trying to keep my voice level. 'My head is *not* big.'

Ronnie snorted in response, which made me flinch with rage even more.

'Alfie's right about you!' he spat. 'You think you're so good.'

I glowered. Alfie wasn't here today – he was one of the older lads that joined in sometimes, but he had a nasty tongue. Everyone knew that he didn't like girls playing football. He didn't think it was right. I wouldn't mind, but the lad could barely kick the ball properly.

'Ronnie, don't anger her,' Davey whined. 'I don't want more arguments. This isn't fun any more.'

'It isn't fun playing with *Martha* any more. She won't pass, she bosses us about.' Ronnie kicked the ball over to me defiantly. 'Just because her family tell her she's some kind of football whizz doesn't mean she has to act like that around us.' He laughed loudly. 'She's only training with those girls because her sister works with them, that's all. And what's the big deal, anyway? Alfie says they're all talk and no talent. They're not a proper team.'

'That's not true! They *are* talented and Hettie says I could be just as good as any of them soon.'

'Not when you act all bossy.'

'I don't act like that.' I took the ball with my foot. 'I just want you to play the game properly, that's all. You still enjoy playing, don't you, Davey?'

I stared at Davey. I'd known the lad most of my life. We'd played football together as long as we could walk. Davey's head was bowed; it was like he couldn't bring himself to look at me. His sweaty hair was plastered against his brow. He swept it back and finally held my gaze.

'It's not like it used to be, Martha,' he said. 'You do boss us about. You shout, and you don't let us have a turn with the ball. You're always trying to dribble or do something fancy.'

'It's my ball,' I muttered sulkily.

'Well, maybe you should take your ball and play by yourself, then,' Davey said softly. 'I'm sorry, Martha, but Ronnie and Alfie are right. You . . . you think you're too good for us.'

With that, he gestured for Ronnie and the two moved back down the street – away from our makeshift goal and pitch.

Away from me.

Was Davey right? Was I really no fun?

I couldn't afford to be just a little bit good. I had to be *as* good, if not better, than the boys if I were to succeed.

I thumped the ball hard against the wall, trying

to control the frustration that was burning inside of me. I hated the fact my friends acted differently towards me now. It no longer felt the same, playing with them.

The lads were just jealous, that's all. They were just jealous of the fact that I was getting to train with the best women's football team in the country. Scrub that – the world! There were some folk now saying that the Dick, Kerr Girls were better than any men's team. So, stick that in your pipe, Davey! What would he know about it, anyway? How would someone like him get such a good opportunity as this?

I knew I was lucky. I knew it was the fact that my sister was close to the team that I got the opportunity to train with them. It also helped that Freddie, my brother, was their team photographer and was loved by the players as much as I loved him. If I was truly honest with myself, I knew I probably wasn't good enough yet to even be in the same training ground as these girls. But as Hettie kept reminding me, I had to keep practising. It was the only way I would get better and stronger.

I'd wanted this for so long, after all.

And then, one day, one wonderful day, maybe I too could play for the Dick, Kerr Girls.

I stayed outside, long after the lads had gone inside for their tea. I knew fair well Mam would be calling me in for mine soon. Freddie was already home from the newspaper and Dad had not long come back from the docks. I knew Hettie was having dinner with her boss, Mr Frankland, tonight, so we wouldn't be waiting for her. Even so, I hoped I wouldn't be called in too soon. I liked being outside, even when it was turning dark. The smoky scent of the evening air soothed me, and everything felt nicer, somehow. It was as if all the sharp edges of the day had been blurred away and softened. I always preferred being outside – it was so much better than being cooped up inside the house.

I still had the football – it was mine after all, or, Freddie's, if you wanted to be exact about it. The poor thing had seen better days and was rather battered, but I loved it. It was the ball that I had learnt to play with. Through this ball, I had found my first love – perhaps my only true love. I was reluctant to give it up. I had a weird feeling that I played better with

this bashed-up thing at my feet. Perhaps it was my lucky charm.

I thundered the ball against the small wall that ran down the ginnel, liking the gentle feeling of the *thump, thump, thump,* as it rumbled through my body. I was pondering what Davey had said – it wasn't like him to be so mardy. Had I really changed that much?

The truth was, I felt like I had a lot to prove, being Hettie's sister. Although Hettie no longer played for the Dick, Kerr Girls, she had been a good player before being injured and now helped to manage and organise the team.

But I would never be as disciplined and controlled as Hettie, and Freddie always said I was 'the wild one'. Fast with my feet, but a little clumsy at times.

Me and Hettie were different in so many ways.

I just hoped I could be as good as my sister on the pitch.

Mam's voice shot through the air, calling me in. From the open door I could smell the scent of beef stew – rich and salty. Despite myself, my stomach growled.

Mam was looking at me strangely. Her eyes had that glint in them, which meant she was trying to study

me, or even read my mind. She reached across the table and placed her hand on my chin, lifting it up to assess me further. I flinched under her tight hold. I hated being looked at like some pet in a shop. Her rough grip was really starting to pinch.

'Mam . . .' I complained.

'You've got a flushed face,' she said. 'Have you been getting into bother?'

'I was playing football out there. My face always gets red when I run.'

Mam sniffed. 'You stopped playing half an hour ago. I heard the lads' mam holler them in.'

I scowled – nothing got past Mam. She would make a grand policeman.

'I was still playing with the ball by myself, that's all.'

Dad laid his newspaper down and studied me for the first time. I noticed that his face had a grey sheen to it and his eyes looked small and dull. I guessed he hadn't slept well again. This was becoming the norm. I often heard him downstairs at night, moving around. Sometimes it kept me awake, too.

'Leave the lass alone,' he grumbled. 'You know she plays like a boy out there. She works hard, that's all.'

'Oh, I know that all right, but I know she quarrels with them too,' Mam replied. 'Only last week she got herself into a fight with that lad, Alfie, down the road.'

'He tackled me badly, I told you. He could have broken my ankle,' I said sourly. 'I only pushed him a bit. It's no more than he deserved.'

'And gave him a kick for good measure.' Mam's eyes fixed on me. 'He had quite a bruise on his side, according to his mam.'

'No doubt he deserved it. It's good the girl can look after herself.' Dad prodded at the paper. 'Especially reading everything that's going on. The world is changing. Martha needs to be strong. We can't continue to mollycoddle her.'

'I wouldn't say I do that . . .'

'Aye, well, I think we're all a bit guilty.' Dad's eyes glinted. 'She is our baby, after all.'

Mam sniffed, but dropped her hand, obviously satisfied.

Freddie nudged me.

'So, anyway, aren't you excited about your training sessions? They start soon, don't they?'

I nodded, my mouth chewing at my food, wondering

why it seemed so tasteless on my tongue. 'Aye. On Monday. I'm a bit nervous, to be honest.'

'You'll be grand, our kid,' Freddie said gently. 'Just remember what I told you before – listen well and keep your head.'

'I will. I just hope I can keep up with them. Hettie keeps telling me how quick they are.' I paused. 'I'm not as fast as Hettie was, you know? Or as strong.'

'I bet you will be, given time. You'll be as fit as a flea by Christmas.'

'There might not be Christmas for anyone,' Mam said shortly and then, seeing me and Freddie look up in surprise, she flapped her hand dismissively. 'I just meant . . . some ingredients are hard to get. Even now. And the cost of everything is going up.'

Dad shifted in his seat. 'I can ask for extra work. I told you that.'

'I can always get a job?' I added quickly, glancing over at Dad. Was it my imagination or was he looking thinner? How on earth could he take on more work? He was doing far too much already.

'You're still at school, Martha,' Freddie said, like I didn't know. 'You can't leave until you're fourteen. The rules have changed.'

'But if we need money I can fit in some hours after school or something? It's not like I want to be there anyway. It's a waste—'

'No.' Mam's voice was firm, cutting through my words. 'No. You don't need to do that, Martha. Freddie's wages are helping now. Hettie's too. We will be fine. School is important, we told you that. You need to focus on your studies.'

Dad nodded. 'You're only twelve, Martha. You're not expected to earn your keep just yet.'

I noticed he was moving his stew around his bowl slowly. Had his hand always been that gnarly? It reminded me of twisted tree bark.

'Are you all right, Dad?'

He lifted his head and his dark eyes fixed on mine. They were watery and made me think of chestnuts. He smiled, but it seemed pinched against his tired face.

'Aye, I'm grand, lass,' he said. 'But I'll be even grander if I know you're not getting into any bother outside. Can you promise me you won't?'

I thought of the boys – of their retreating backs and muttered words. I doubted I would be outside with them for a while. They probably wouldn't want to play

with me again. A brief moment of sadness washed over me. Had I lost my friends for good?

'Martha,' Dad said, louder this time. 'Are you listening to me?'

'Yes, I am, Dad. I'm sorry.' I flashed him a weak smile. 'I promise I won't get into any bother.'

I just hoped I could stick to my promise.