
FOOTBALL
SPY
RED
CARD

FOOTBALL SPY

RED CARD



By the bestselling author of *Unbelievable Football*

MATT OLDFIELD

HODDER



Chapter One

'At last!' Finn shouted, jumping down off the wall and swinging his school bag up on to his back. 'Look, everyone – Maestro has finally left the building! Mate, what took you so long?'

As he took the school steps two at a time, Ethan smiled, happy to see that his friends had waited for him like normal. 'Sorry, me and Mr Jenkins were just talking football,' he replied with an awkward little shrug. It was meant to say 'no big deal', but it failed big-time.

'I knew it!' Omar exploded with his usual mix of love and rage. 'It's always the same with you, man – chit-chatting on and on about the game, when we could be PLAYING it instead!'

With those last words, he handed Ethan his penalty for being late: a heavy kit bag filled with all their football trainers, which smelled far from fresh. It was now his turn

to carry it all the way home. Urghh, maybe he should have just lied and said something about homework instead . . .

'You know, if you become any more of a teacher's pet, they'll be rubbing your belly and buying you a collar!' Isaac added, and they all burst out laughing, including Ethan.

'Come on, let's gooooo,' Finn announced, walking off ahead. 'The others will be waiting!'

Ethan, Finn, Omar and Isaac – the four of them had been best friends since their first days at Princetown Primary, and now as Year 9s at Chesham High they were still as close as ever, and just as crazy about football.

'Hey, Ethan, have you seen that new camera angle of the Hurricanes' winning goal yet?' Finn called out over the roar of busy traffic as they walked home together towards Horton Crescent, the estate where they all lived. 'Man, your team got lucky last night . . . AGAIN! As the ball comes in, Danny Masters gives the defender a clear shove in the back. It's a blatant foul; I don't know how the ref missed it!'

'I do,' Omar replied bitterly. 'How does the song go again? Oh yeah. Same old Hurricanes, always cheating! Look, check it out for yourself . . .'

'Nah, I'm not so sure, you know.' Isaac shook his head, taking the opposite view to Omar as usual. 'The defender goes down a bit easy for me!'

‘Mate, you know NOTHING!’ Omar shot back with a loud snort. ‘OK, let’s find out what Ethan thinks then. Try not to be too biased, yeah?’

As with most of their friendly ‘debates’, it was left for him to decide. In their gang of four, Ethan was the quiet, thoughtful one; the wise one, especially when it came to football. The others really respected him for that, and so while he watched the short clip a few times, they waited eagerly for the result, like anxious fans at a match.

As painful as it was going against his own favourite team, Ethan always gave his honest verdict and he always believed in fair play. ‘That’s a clear foul,’ he admitted eventually. ‘The defender would have got to the ball first if Masters hadn’t barged into him like that.’

‘See!’ Omar cheered, dancing down the pavement and declaring himself the winner. ‘Maestro says no goal.’

They had first started calling Ethan that back in Year 5, when he won the school’s special World Cup quiz without getting a single question wrong, including the name of the Uruguay national team manager. Easy! Óscar Tabárez, and he had even got a bonus point for knowing his nickname too: ‘*El Maestro*’, ‘The Teacher’ in English.

Ever since, ‘Maestro’ had been Ethan’s nickname too, a tribute to his football knowledge, but also to his style of play

out on the pitch, as he was hopefully about to show . . .

When the boys finally reached Horton Crescent, they didn't head back to their different homes; the night was still young and neither cold nor wet, so they rushed over to the old tarmac court at the centre of the estate, or 'the Cage' as all the local kids called it. The court had rusting basketball hoops at either end, their nets long gone, but really, it was a football pitch. Their football pitch.

'Sorry, we're late – blame Ethan!' Omar called out as they quickly dropped their bags down on the concrete outside the Cage.

'Hurry up, we've started without you,' a boy called Mustafa shouted back from inside. 'You missed an absolute worldie from Mason!'

'Coming!'

Once their school jumpers were off and their best trainers were on, the four boys raced into the Cage and were quickly split between the two teams: Omar and Isaac on one side, Finn and Ethan on the other.

'Right, show-time!'

With so many players and so little space, their matches were always fierce, loud and fast-paced, with lots of goals and lots of skills. What could be better than that? Basically, it was a super-fun free for all, and there was only one thing

you couldn't do: simply blast the ball between the posts.

Boooooo – boring! No, the aim of the game was to score in the most stylish way possible; the more ridiculous the move, the better.

Stepovers were standard, rainbow flicks were popular and so were rabona shots, but to get the biggest cheers of all, you had to have at least one cheeky . . .

'NUTMEEEEEEEG!'

Those were the rules of street football, and they suited some players more than others. Finn and Omar, for example, loved nothing more than showing off their flashiest footwork. They were both at the Ridgefield Rovers academy, doing serious training three nights a week, so this was their chance to relax and have some fun.

'Waaaaaaaaaa, I hope you got that on video!' Omar called out to the kids watching on the outside, rattling the metal railings like a prisoner gone wild. The pitch itself was a no-phone zone, so they relied on spectators to film their highlight reels for social media. 'I'm telling you, that's gonna go VIRAL!'

Ethan, on the other hand, was a player who didn't like to show off. Tricks and flicks weren't his style at all. He was all about the basics – control, pass, move, control, pass, move . . . Amid all the chaos of the Cage, he was the calm



one who played the ball around quickly and cleverly, never giving it away, and making his team tick.

The Maestro in midfield.

No, it wasn't as entertaining to watch as a beautiful bit of skill, but it was very effective. Whichever team he was on almost always won, and that wasn't a coincidence.

'Ethan is an old-school baller,' Finn liked to say if anyone asked why he always picked his friend first. 'Look, he's even got the plain black boots to prove it!'

There was another reason why he wore old, battered Adidas Copas, but the fact that his dad couldn't afford a new pair was something Ethan preferred not to talk about, just like he preferred not to talk about his big dream.

'I want to be a professional footballer one day' – no way, that sounded way too stupid to say out loud, especially now that he was thirteen years old and still didn't even play for a local club, let alone a proper academy like Finn and Omar. So instead Ethan kept his dream hidden in his own head, right next to the last words his mum had said to him: 'Find what you love the most and do it forever.'

For Ethan, that was football – he was 110% sure about that – but on the pitch, he often struggled to stand out. He wasn't the fastest player in Horton Crescent, or the

tallest, or the strongest; he didn't do many skills, or score many goals. Yes, he did have the best football brain, but did anyone really notice, or care, about that? Not academy scouts, apparently . . .

Time always flew when they were having fun in the Cage, and before he knew it Ethan was looking up at a dark sky. 'Whoa, what time is it?' he asked.

One of the kids on the outside checked their phone. 'Nearly eight.'

'No way, guys. I've gotta go! Dad will kill me if I'm not home soon.'

As he turned to rush off, however, Finn put an arm around his shoulder. 'OK, Maestro, but first . . . NEXT GOAL WINS?'

Ethan paused for a moment to weigh up his options. Football or family? Football or food? Football or homework? And then nodded. 'Next goal wins.'

'All right, let's do this!'

By then, many of the other players had gone home, leaving just four v four. Perfect! Ethan was brilliant in tight spaces, but a little extra room was always useful, especially if he was going to stand out.

'Yes!' He called for the ball in the middle of the pitch, and as it rolled towards him Ethan didn't just stand there

waiting for it. His eyes were always busy, scanning the space around him:



Where was each of his opponents?

Where was each of his teammates?

Wait, what was that?

Out of the corner of his eye, Ethan spotted something moving in the darkness outside the Cage, but he didn't have time for that now. His brain was focused on planning his next move on the football pitch.

How long would he have on the ball?

And most importantly, what was he going to do with it?

So when the pass arrived, Ethan already knew exactly what he was going to do next.

With his first touch, he shifted it to the right, shielding the ball with his body as Isaac rushed in from the side.

And with his second, he fired a slick pass into a small space that had opened up between Omar and Jason . . .

'Yesssss, Maestro!'

Finn was on to it in a flash, and he started celebrating before he'd even touched the ball. Although the goal in front of him was empty, he couldn't help finishing things off in style, with a risky, no-look rabona flick. This was street

football, after all.

GOOOOAAAALLLL!!!!

While Finn had scored it, there was no doubt who the real matchwinner was.

'MAESTROOOOOOOOOO!' Mustafa cheered, lifting Ethan high into the air.

As he twirled around in triumph, his first thought was, *What a feeling – this is why I love football so much!*

And his second thought? *Wait, who's that strange man over there?*

Yes, even as he enjoyed his most glorious moment in ages, Ethan's eyes were still scanning, and his brain was still whirring.

The last spectators had left a long time ago, but there was definitely still someone there, lurking in the shadows cast by the silver birch trees and doing his very best to stay hidden. Ethan had noticed a flash of movement there earlier, and now he could see his dark puffer jacket and the baseball cap pulled down low to cover his face, which had a picture of an animal on the front. A bird, perhaps? Ethan couldn't be sure from that distance, but he stored the tiny detail away like a squirrel preparing for winter, along with all the other odd



facts and random memories in his head.

So this mysterious man in the baseball cap – who was he and why was he watching their game? Unfortunately Ethan didn't get a chance to find out because when his feet landed back on solid ground and he took another look, there was no one there.

Hmmm, had he already headed off to the car park on the left? Nope, no one there.

Or maybe he had rushed off along the path to the right? Nope, no one there either.

The guy had somehow disappeared without a trace!

'That's weird,' Ethan muttered to himself, but he didn't have time to stop and give it any more attention. He was already late for dinner, and Dad would probably be thinking about throwing his food in the bin . . .

'Great game, guys. Until tomorrow!' he yelled out over his shoulder as he raced off towards Tredwell House.