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opening extract from

Girls FC: So What if I Hog the Ball ?

written by

Helena Pielichaty

published by

Walker Books Ltd.

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So What If I Hog The Ball?

Helena Pielichaty



WALKER
BOOKS

For Eudy Simelane (1977–2008), captain of the South African Women's football team

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First published 2010 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Cover illustration © 2010 Sonia Leong

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This book has been typeset in Helvetica and Handwriter

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-1739-8

www.walker.co.uk

☆☆ The Team ☆☆

☆ **Megan "Meggo" Fawcett** GOAL

☆ **Petra "Wardy" Ward** DEFENCE

☆ **Lucy "Goose" Skidmore** DEFENCE

☆ **Dylan "Dyl" or "Psycho 1" McNeil** LEFT WING

☆ **Holly "Hols" or "Wonder" Woolcock** DEFENCE

☆ **Veronika "Nika" Kozak** MIDFIELD

☆ **Jenny-Jane "JJ" or "Hoggy" Bayliss** MIDFIELD

☆ **Gemma "Hursty" or "Mod" Hurst** MIDFIELD

☆ **Eve "Akka" Akboh** STRIKER

☆ **Tabinda "Tabby" or "Tabs" Shah** STRIKER/MIDFIELD

☆ **Daisy "Dayz" or "Psycho 2" McNeil** RIGHT WING

☆ **Amy "Minto" or "Lil Posh" Minter** VARIOUS

Official name: Parrs Under 11s, also known as the Parsnips

Ground: Lornton FC, Low Road, Lornton

Capacity: 500

Affiliated to: the Nettie Honeyball Women's League junior division

Sponsors: Sweet Peas Garden Centre, Mowborough

Club colours: red and white; red shirts with white sleeves, white shorts, red socks with white trim

Coach: Hannah Preston

Assistant coach: Katie Regan

☆☆ Star Player ☆☆

☆ **Age:** nearly 10

☆ **Birthday:** October – you don't need to know when in October

☆ **School:** been to a few – which one do you want?

☆ **Position in team:** I'll play anywhere, but I like playing out wide on the wings best

☆ **Likes:** footy, especially watching the Parrs senior team play from my bedroom window. Telly. Being left alone.

☆ **Dislikes:** my brothers, especially Billy when he's in a mood and it all kicks off in our house. Teachers. People who boss you around. Anything pink.

☆ **Supports:** Parrs (seniors), England, Millwall FC (they're like my family – nobody like us but we don't care.)

Jenny-Jane "Hoggy" Bayliss

☆ **Favourite player(s) on team:** Megan 'cos she let me on the team and she's never judged me. Gemma for skill. And Nika's all right too.

☆ **Best football moment:** when we win, of course

☆ **Match preparation:** I turn up early and practise with a tennis ball

☆ **Have you got a lucky mascot or a ritual you have to do before or after a match?**
What for? You can go nuts doing that.

☆ **What do you do in your spare time?**
Mind my own business

☆ **Favourite book(s):** Foul Play by Tom Palmer

☆ **Favourite band(s):** Aerosmith

☆ **Favourite film:** Transformers

☆ **Favourite TV programme(s):** Wayne Rooney's Street Striker

Pre-match Interview

Wotcha. My name is Jenny-Jane Bayliss and I play in a girls' football team called the Parrs Under 11s. It's the greatest girls' football team in the world, and if anyone says it isn't they'll get battered.

I've got to tell you about the start of the second season. I'm not happy. There's a lot of family stuff tied up in that part. Stuff I'd rather forget. But Megan says not to worry, to tell it like it happened and it'll all be fine. I hope she's right. If not, our Billy's gonna kill me.

Cheers,
Jenny-Jane Bayliss

1

It was half-past eight and the taxi driver was outside the gate, piping his horn like crazy, making it very difficult to concentrate on the weather report.

"Come on, ducky. You'll be late," Mam said, with that wheedling tone in her voice – it never works, so I don't know why she uses it. I glanced away from the TV to find her standing with my backpack in her hands, her thin pencilled-on eyebrows furrowed like corrugated cardboard. "Please, Jenny-Jane!" she begged.

She sounded desperate but I really, *really* didn't want to go to prison today, so I returned to the weather. Temperatures were going to be average for the time of year.

"I'll give you five pounds," Mam said.

"Nope."

"Ten?"

"Mam, you know you're skint. Stop showing yourself up."

She sighed. "All right, Jenny-Jane. I give in. You can stay at home."

"Honest?" I asked, swivelling round to check if her face matched her words. I mean, it usually took a bit more work than that to make her crumble.

She dumped my bag on the kitchen table and nodded. "Honest – if it means it stops that din out there. At this rate that idiot will wake everybody up."

By "everybody" she means Dad and my brothers, Billy and Brendan. None of them works – Dad's on disability and my two brothers are bone-idle – so most mornings they lie in.

"Thanks, Mam, you're a star." I jumped up, my heart soaring as I headed for the door so I could tell the driver to take a hike.

"Mind you..." Mam said, just as I reached for the door handle.

"'Mind you' what?"

"I can't guarantee what mood our Billy'll be in when he wakes up and finds you here."

She had a point. Since he'd come out of the youth offenders' centre, Billy's moods were gruesome. He'd turned into a right psycho. On the other hand, the thought of spending the day with the psychos in Little Alcatraz didn't exactly thrill me to bits, either. This was not a win-win situation.

I looked at Mam, looked at the weather reader, looked at Mam again. Should I stay or should I go? My eye caught the day at the top of the weather chart. Tuesday. It was Tuesday, and Tuesday was football training. That was the clincher. I didn't want to give Billy an excuse for keeping me from going to that. Apart from the match proper, training was the best part of my week. "I suppose I'll go to the prison, then," I grumbled, snatching my bag from the table.

"But if I come home in a body bag, don't say I didn't warn you."

Mam gave me a relieved smile and reached for the detergent bottle. "Have a nice day," she called just before I slammed the door.

2

Half an hour later the taxi driver pulled up outside Mowborough Pupil Referral Unit. OK, I admit that it's not a prison exactly, but it's near enough. Like one teacher at King John's, my last school, said it's a big step in that direction.

To fool people into thinking it was a normal place for normal kids, the outside of the PRU looked like any school building. You know – flat roof, rows of windows, the few shrubs outside the main entrance trimmed with empty crisp packets. Inside wasn't that bad either – better than King John's, anyway. For starters there were only six in the class. Yep, six – me and five psycho boys. My dad reckoned the unit was better than private school, what with the teacher–pupil ratio and the free taxi ride. That's because he doesn't have

to come here, I thought, as I spotted Mrs Kelly, the head warden, coming towards me, a chunky necklace swinging from her chunky neck, her bare arms full of folders.

"Ah! Jenny-Jane," she said. "Just the person I'd like to see. Come into my room for a minute, if you don't mind."

I panicked, wondering if I had anything in my bag I shouldn't have, like one of our nicked mobiles or something. What had I packed that morning? Sarnies for lunch, pencil tin and a tennis ball in case I got chance to do a few keepy-uppies later. Nope. Everything in my bag was legit. I sighed and told myself not to be such a wimp. "Why, Miss? I'm not that late, am I?" I asked.

"Don't worry. It's not about your punctuality." She elbowed open the door to her office and I reluctantly followed her in.

Mrs Kelly told me to sit down. She then took the top file from the pile she'd been carrying and opened it. It had a pink spine.

I hate pink. It's the vilest of all colours. Everyone knows red's best, followed by blue, then white.

"Is that about me?" I asked.

"It is."

"Why's it pink? Because I'm the only girl here?"

"Coincidence," she said, leaning forward so that her necklace collided with the folders. "So, Jenny-Jane, how are you settling in?"

"All right, I suppose." That was if you called sitting in the corner of a classroom watching two teachers trying to control five loopy boys all day "settling in". Three weeks and two days I'd been there, excluding the summer holidays. It felt like three years.

Mrs Kelly gazed at me in a soppy way, which worried me. I wasn't used to being gazed at like that, especially by head teachers. "Look at you. You really shouldn't be here at all, should you?"

Amen to that, I thought.

"We need to get you back into mainstream school as soon as possible, don't we?"

"Not King John's," I told her. "I wouldn't go back there if you paid me."

"No, not King John's," she agreed instantly. "I don't think there's much danger of that."

"Good," I said.

"We'd be looking at one of the other Mowborough primary schools."

"Fair enough."

"But first you have to prove that you're capable of being in a classroom environment without disrupting it – and that's not always been easy for you, has it, Jenny-Jane?"

I shrugged. There wasn't much I could say. The evidence was in front of her, in black and white and triplicate.

"So I'm setting you some targets based on what Mrs Law and Mr Upton have told me..."

Targets? Feeble old targets? She must know I'd been set more of them in my time than Robin Hood. "Go on." I sighed.

Mrs Kelly picked up a loose piece of paper from

the top of my file. "Your target this week will be to mix more," she said. "Can you think of any ways in which you could do that?"

"To be honest, mixing with nutters isn't my thing, Miss," I told her.

The phone rang before she could reply. "You're kidding," she said to whoever was on the other end. "But he knows he's on a final warning... Oh, send him to me straight away. Yes, yes, straight away..." She put the phone down, grunted, then closed my file. "I'm sorry, Jenny-Jane, I'm going to have to leave it there. Problems in the seniors."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "They're even bigger nutters up that end than down this end, from what I've seen."

She drew a breath, then decided not to waste it by denying what I'd said and gave me a full-beam-ahead smile instead. "So you're going to have a think about mixing, aren't you?"

"I'll think about it," I agreed, "but I'm not making no promises."

☆ ☆ ☆

I thought about it all day. I thought about it when this kid in an Arsenal shirt, Ronnie Parkin, did nothing but stare at me as he picked at the scab on his ear and ate the crust. I thought about it when two of the other nut-jobs kicked off after lunch and one of them, Clayton White, swept my stuff off my table with his arm as he passed on his way to the time-out room. I thought about it when Mrs Law gave me a book to read that I'd already read and said, "Read it again, then, dear," like I was two or something. I thought about it and what I thought was this: targets are rubbish.