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Opening extract from

Football Shorts

Written by

Tom Watt

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INTRODUCTION

SHELBY TOWN

Shelby Town are a fictional football team who play in the real-life Barclays Premier League. They're also the team that feature – one way or another – in all the stories you're about to read. Town have a bit in common with a lot of real clubs, like Wigan, Blackburn, Norwich and Reading, to name just a few.

Shelby is a town somewhere in the middle of England, halfway between London and Birmingham. Supporting Town has been pretty exciting lately. Fifteen years ago, they were playing non-league football in the old Vauxhall Conference. Like at so many smaller clubs, money was tight and the players were semi-professional. But then a local businessman, Ernest Carstairs, bought the club, paid off its debts and gave the manager some money to spend on the team. Since then, Shelby Town haven't looked back. Under boss Mick Diamond, they climbed through the divisions and then, a couple of years ago, won the Championship Play-Off Final at Wembley.

The hero at Wembley was the club's longest-serving player, skipper Dave Morgan. Town taking a place in the

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Premier League was a dream come true for Dave and for everyone connected with the club.

Mick Diamond trusted the boys who'd got Town promoted, but he brought in a couple of overseas stars to strengthen the squad: French midfielder Jean-Pierre Vert and Nigerian striker Dotun Odegbame. And lads like Stuart Dolan come through from the youth team to make their mark in the Premier League too.

Against all the odds – and despite the pundits saying they were relegation certainties – Shelby Town survived. In fact, that first season in the Premier League the club reached the Carling Cup final.

You may have read about Town – and the personalities behind the scenes – in the Double Club English and Maths textbooks used in many schools in recent years.

It's been an incredible journey for the players, the staff and the fans: for everyone at Shelby Town, in fact, including Ernest, Mick, Dave, Dotun, Stuart and Jean-Pierre. Now read on. The story's only just begun…

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TEAM SHEET

TOM WATT

Tom Watt is an actor who also writes books. Mostly about football. His last big one was called *2010: When the World Cup Came to South Africa*. He invented the club in *Football Shorts*, Shelby Town, for some textbooks he wrote for the Double Club programme for schools. He writes regularly for the Arsenal match programme and is currently working on a football-based feature film.

VINCENT KOMPANY

Vincent Kompany was born in Uccle in Belgium and started his career at Anderlecht, where he played for three years before moving to Hamburg in Germany. In 2008 he joined his current team, Manchester City, and won the Premier League with them in 2012. Vincent is currently captain of both City and Belgium and is a FIFA Ambassador for the charity SOS Children's Villages.

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NICK HORNBY

Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, which describes his own life growing up as an Arsenal fan, is one of the best adult novels ever written about football and was made into a very successful film. Nick has published several other equally best-selling books and screenplays, including *About a Boy*, *High Fidelity* and *Slam*, his novel about a teenage skateboarder named Sam.

TOMAS ROSICKY

Tomáš Rosický is one of the Czech Republic's most talented players ever. He was born in Prague and played for Sparta before moving to Germany, when he joined Borussia Dortmund, and then to the UK in 2005 when he signed for Arsenal. Tomáš has won nearly ninety international caps and has captained his country at both the European Championships and the World Cup.

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MAL PEET

Mal Peet grew up in Norfolk, which explains why he supports Norwich City. His books have won more cups than the Canaries, like the Carnegie Medal and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. He's written three football novels: *Keeper*, *The Penalty* and *Exposure*. The character Paul Faustino, who features in Mal's story here, actually has his own website. Google it!

MATT HOLLAND

Matt Holland had a fantastic career as a midfielder for Bournemouth, Ipswich, Charlton and the Republic of Ireland, scoring for Ireland against Cameroon at the 2002 World Cup. It turns out that Matt is as good at talking about football as he was at playing it, so he now works as an expert pundit for just about every radio and TV station you can think of.

ALAN SEFTON

Alan Sefton has worked at Arsenal for over twenty-five years and is head of the club's award-winning community department. Based at the Emirates Stadium, Alan and his staff use football as a way to connect people of all ages and backgrounds, especially teenagers, using schemes like the Arsenal Double Club literacy programme.

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CURTIS DAVIES

Curtis Davies was born in Leytonstone in London and made his debut for Luton Town when they were still in the Football League. Since then he has played for West Bromwich Albion, Aston Villa, Leicester City and Birmingham City, where he's been since 2011. Curtis made his international debut at centre half for the England Under-21s in 2006 and has been in full squads since without winning his first cap yet.

FAYE WHITE

Faye White grew up in Horley in Surrey. She plays centre back and is one of English football's most decorated players, having won nearly thirty trophies as captain of Arsenal Ladies and captaining for England at four major tournaments. Faye was awarded an MBE in 2006 for her services to football and had to retire from playing because of injury earlier this year.

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ALAN DAVIES

Alan Davies is a comedian, writer and actor who is probably best known as the star of the TV detective series *Jonathan Creek* and the film *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*, as well as being a permanent panellist on the quiz show *QI*. Alan's latest book is called *Teenage Revolution* and is about growing up in the 1980s.

HILARY FREEMAN

Hilary Freeman is a writer who lives in Camden Town in North London, and she's written five novels. The latest is called *The Boy From France* and is the third in a series called Camden Town Tales. As well as writing, Hilary is an agony aunt for newspapers and magazines. As she supports Arsenal, she knows all about agony…

TOM PALMER

Tom Palmer was born in Leeds and supports Leeds United. His first novel, *Foul Play*, was shortlisted for the Blue Peter Book Award, and he is the official author of the Premier League Reading Stars scheme. Look out for *White Fear* the latest title in Tom's new series of football stories, The Squad, which is out now.

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PAUL COOKSON

Paul Cookson is the poet in residence at the National Football Museum. He writes poetry for children and adults and had two new collections out last year, *Give Us a Goal!* and *Saturday Men*. Paul performs his poems live at festivals, on the radio and in thousands of schools and libraries all over the country. He also entertains audiences (and drives his family mad) by playing the ukulele.

TERRY DEARY

Terry Deary was born in Sunderland and still supports his hometown club. He has written around 200 books over the past thirty-five years, most of them for children, and is also an actor, playwright and scriptwriter. Terry is most famous for creating the Horrible Histories books, which have been made into a hugely popular TV series as well as a stage show, a computer game and even a virtual world.

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A QUICK ONE-TWO

TOMAS ROSICKY

Sometimes brothers are the very best of friends. Other times they are the bitterest of rivals. But most of the time they're both. That's exactly how it always was with me and Jerry.



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I should get it out of the way now, I suppose. Yes, I'm Tom. And my younger brother's Jerry. What were Mum and Dad thinking when it came to naming us? You needn't bother coming up with jokes about us being cartoon characters. We've heard them all. Actually, we heard them all a long time ago. And there were times, when we were younger, when we probably looked like Tom and Jerry, too. Chasing each other around the block of flats, getting into fights, arguing about anything and everything. That's how brothers are.

We could've been twins, everybody said. We looked so alike. Although every time Jerry grew a bit, I'd put a spurt on too, to make sure I stayed a centimetre or two taller. Anyway, together we were the Barlow Boys. Any time anybody talked about us, the chances are it was to do with one thing. Jerry and I did loads of stuff together, when he wasn't getting on my nerves at least. But what we did together more than anything was play football. School playground, down the sports centre, out on the grass in front of the flats. Even indoors if Mum wasn't looking. Anywhere, everywhere. All day, every day.



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No surprise, really, that the Barlow Boys loved the game. Our dad, Mick, played for Shelby Town FC back in the 1970s, when they were still knocking around in the Midland Combination League. He was always telling us how good a player he used to be. So we'd ask him, "What were you doing playing in the Midland Combination, then?" Only joking, though: Dad's a Shelby man through and through. I don't think anybody is prouder of how far Town have come since the old non-league days.

All the while me and Jerry were growing up, Dad had his own windows business, which meant he could work his own hours. Once he realized his sons liked football, that was it. Windows came second to running our little estate team, Rosemount Rovers – "The Reds". Dad did all his coaching badges. He got the council to let us use the park for training. He got to know all the parents on the estate and managed to convince them that the best players should join us instead of going off to one of the bigger teams in town. Before we knew it, Dad's under-10s were beating all comers.

Not that winning was what it was about for Dad. Not when we were eight and nine years old. Training? Well, he just used to arrange a time and a place, then me and Jerry – and all the other kids from the estate – would turn up for a game. Two-a-side,

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five-a-side, seven- or eight-a-side. If you were there, you played. When it came to coaching, all I can ever remember Dad doing was showing us how to kick the ball properly. In fact, Dad used to call it out so often that it became the Rosemount Rovers catchphrase: *"Laces!"*

I loved to play and my little brother Jerry loved to play. Although he hated it when I called him "Little Brother", which obviously made me do it all the time, just to wind him up. Even if there was nobody else around and Dad was at work, we'd have a game between ourselves. Some of the biggest matches happened right there in our hallway. Mum and Dad's bedroom door was one goal and the cupboard at the end was the other. One against one, and the winner would get a free flick at the loser's ear. That hallway was Manor Park or The Emirates, Wembley or the Bernabéu.

I was only a year older than Jerry. That's what he said, anyway. Actually, it was more like fourteen months. But, like I say, he didn't want to seem like the little brother. Whatever we were doing – but especially if it was football – Jerry was always desperate to get the better of me. Sometimes he'd come flying into a tackle and I'd think, If he doesn't hurt me, he's going to hurt himself! He had to beat me, had to prove he

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was quicker, cleverer, better at football than I was. And that kept me on my toes.

So if it was me versus Jerry, the competition was fierce. Every now and again, of course, it would end in a scrap: Jerry used to think he could fight me as well. But it wasn't always brother against brother, and I think Jerry liked it even better when we were on the same side. When we went down to the grass out in front of the flats, the game would always be the Barlow Boys versus the rest. Jerry loved that and, to be honest, so did I. I wouldn't ever tell him to his face but my brother really was a good player. If I had the choice, I always wanted Jerry on my side.

That was the two of us, from as soon as we could walk. Mum says I even got Jerry to go in goal *before* he could walk. I don't know about that. But I do know that all my best memories of growing up are football and Jerry and me. What started out as a kickaround for the boys on the estate turned into Rosemount Rovers when I was six and Jerry was five. Dad never pushed us; he never needed to. The problem was him and Mum getting us indoors for dinner and bed. But then Shelby Town came along and turned things upside down.



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I was just coming up to eleven so Jerry was almost ten. With Rosemount Rovers, it didn't matter how old or young you were; we just played. Not in a league or anything, but friendly games over in the park when Dad could get them organized. We lived for those Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons, though, when The Reds could take on the world. Somehow or other, Dad got us some kit from somewhere so we looked the part as well. And so did he: for special occasions he used to get out his old Shelby Town tracksuit and put it on. He'd laugh and say, "You boys had better call me 'The Boss'!"

It all happened at one of those friendly games. It was a Sunday afternoon and we were playing a team from Lea Vale. Most of them were a year or two older than us, but we weren't worried about that. We got a team of eight together. There were more of them, but Dad agreed with their coach that they could just use subs whenever they wanted. We lined up, ready to go, with me and Jerry playing up front.

Sometimes when we played, it was as if me and Jerry knew what the other one was going to do before he did it. I'd make a run and, without me calling for it, the ball would suddenly be rolling into my path. Or I'd cross the ball without even looking and Jerry

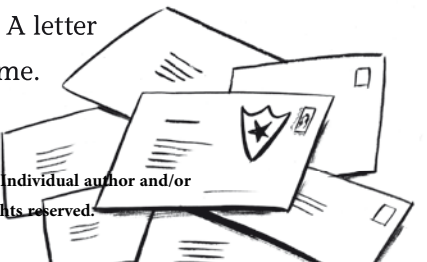
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would be there to head it into the net. Well, against that team from Lea Vale, we had one of those games. Whatever we did seemed to come off and we both scored hat-tricks. Eventually, they put on a couple of extra players just to make the game a bit more even.

I'd already lost count of the score by half-time. We all gathered around Dad as he handed out bottles of water. He didn't really say anything; he didn't need to – just asked us if we were enjoying ourselves. Before any of us could answer, the other team's coach came over and tapped Dad on the shoulder. They walked a little way away from us. Watching out of the corner of my eye, I could see Dad nodding at what the man was saying and then both of them started laughing.

After the game, Dad took us all out for a meal on the High Street. He'd never done that before. I knew we'd played well but he must have dug into his savings for pizzas and ice creams for eight, mustn't he? He had this big smile on his face that lasted all the way home. But when I asked him what was going on, he just told me to mind my own business and then ruffled my hair.

Well, a couple of days later we found out what'd happened at the game, although, by then, me and Jerry had forgotten all about it. A letter came in the post, addressed to me.



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I opened it and straight away saw it had the Shelby Town club badge at the top of the page. I called out to Mum and Dad and they came through to the lounge. Shelby Town were inviting me along to Manor Park to play in a special practice game, where they were going to choose boys to join the under-12s squad at the academy. The letter said they'd had very good reports about me from a local coach they knew.

I could see by the look on Dad's face how proud he was, and I was really excited as well. But I had this funny feeling that it wasn't all good news. At bedtime, I showed Jerry the letter and he burst out crying. Not that he wasn't happy for me; he said he was. But he was heartbroken, too. The idea of me going off to play football and him not being there? He couldn't handle that at all. He said it felt like he'd never get the chance to play with me again. I tried to explain that it was only a trial and I might not get in, and even if I did, I'd still want to play out in front of the flats every day. But Jerry just pulled the covers over his head and told me he wanted to go to sleep.

I could tell that Jerry was lying there thinking. I was lying there thinking as well. Should I turn Shelby Town down? I couldn't even if I'd wanted to. Dad would've been really upset; they were his team, after all. But I hated seeing Jerry so unhappy. I didn't want

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to let him down either. I lay in bed, staring at the orange light from the streetlamps glowing behind the curtains. I don't know how long it took me to get to sleep but, by the time I did, I'd decided what we'd do.

Mum said she was too nervous to come and didn't want to put me off. She probably meant she fancied a couple of hours of peace and quiet around the house. Whatever: me, Dad and Jerry drove down to Manor Park early. Very, very early. Dad said I shouldn't blow my chances by being late before I'd even kicked a ball. But an hour before kick-off? Well, at least it gave me and Jerry time to go over our plan. In whispers, obviously, because we couldn't let Dad know. He'd find out soon enough.

It was fantastic. The Shelby Town youth coaches were at the ground to meet us. We went through to the first team dressing room and I started getting changed. They'd laid out kit for all of us. It was as if we were professional players for the day. I recognized a couple of the other boys from Rosemount Rovers games. I could see how nervous they were, and they could probably see how nervous I was. One of the coaches split us up into teams; they had all our names and positions. Then we went out onto the pitch to warm up.

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They'd put out moveable goals on the edge of the two penalty areas, so we didn't play on a full-sized pitch. But it felt like Wembley: playing in a proper stadium, in front of a crowd, even if it was just a couple of hundred parents and friends. And Jerry and Dad. I gave Little Brother the thumbs up and he waved back.

The game kicked off and I played up front. It was hard. All the other boys were good players: the best, I suppose, from their schools and their Sunday teams. One of the defenders I was playing against towered over me. Surely he couldn't be the same age as the rest of us? I just got my head down and played. I didn't score but I set up a goal for the boy who was playing left wing. It felt like I was doing OK. The side I was playing for were 2–1 down at half-time.

During the break, while we got a drink on the side of the pitch, I looked over and saw Dad, sitting with some other parents and grinning from ear to ear. I didn't know if that was because I was playing well or because he was just proud I was playing at the ground where he had twenty years before. I gave him a wave and then saw Jerry, sitting behind him with a "Well, what d'you reckon?" look on his face. I winked at him and then ran on to start the second half.

We equalized almost straight away. The boy on the left wing crossed the ball in low and I got there

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ahead of the big centre half. *Goal!* One of the coaches was refereeing the game, and as I jogged back to the centre circle he gave me a grin and said, "You'll do for me, son!"

I was chuffed but I tried not to show it and just shrugged.

"Thanks, sir."

Was that the right thing to say? Is a football coach like one of your teachers at school? Anyway, the game carried on until there were about twenty minutes to go: and it was still 2–2.

I peered over towards the stand and I could see Dad but no sign of Jerry. Now was the time! I went up to the ref and told him I really needed the loo. "Go on, then, son," he said. "But don't take all day." I sprinted off to the changing rooms and, just as we'd planned, Jerry was there waiting for me. I got out of my kit and he put it on. I slipped into the tracksuit he'd been wearing. As quick as I'd run in, Jerry ran out. The ref waved at him, thinking it was me, and told him to come on. I sneaked out of the changing room and up into the stand. I slid into the seat behind Dad, who was so involved with the game he didn't even turn round.

I'd had my chance and now Jerry had his. I don't know what I thought might happen but I just wanted Jerry to get a taste of the big time. If worst came to

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worst, we'd just change clothes back again after the game. But, within a minute or two, I could see Jerry wasn't going to be satisfied with that. Other players were starting to tire but he was racing around: a man on a mission. One minute he was clearing the ball in his own six-yard box, the next, he was making a run in behind the other team's back four.

And then it happened. I knew Jerry was a good player but maybe even I didn't know *how* good. He picked up the ball just inside his own half and raced off across the pitch. Their midfielders didn't know



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whether to tackle him, or stand off. He found himself out on the right, with two defenders in front of him. What did he do? He just chipped the ball over their heads and dashed between them before they could react. I held my breath. Jerry was in on goal, then as the goalie came out to close down he bent the ball around him with his left foot and it went in off the far post: you could hear the "ping" before it settled into the net.

There was a moment of complete silence, on and off the pitch. I mean, that was the kind of goal people expected to see Lionel Messi score. Jerry just clenched his fist and then ran back for kick-off as if it was something he did most days. I leapt up and gave Dad a big hug from behind.

"What about that, Dad?"

What happened next was straight out of a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Dad looked at me. Then looked out onto the pitch. Then back at me. And then, very slowly, back towards Jerry. His mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish's. Until he swung round and spluttered, "Which one *are* you?"

A few minutes later, the full-time whistle went. Rather than face Dad, I jumped out of my seat and ran down towards the pitch. I could see that the coach who'd

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been refereeing the game had already gone up and started talking to Jerry. I ran on, not wanting my brother to get into trouble – or, at least, not get into trouble on his own. I could hear him asking Jerry what his name was, and how old he was. Just as I got alongside them, the coach turned to me and growled, "Stay right where you are." I froze on the spot.

Then he turned back to Jerry. As the coach spoke, Jerry's eyes opened wider and wider. It turned out that Shelby Town were starting an under-11s group in a month's time. The coach wanted to talk to Dad about getting Jerry back for those trials.

"Not that I need a second look, really," he said with a grin.

His smile disappeared, though, as he turned back to me. For a minute, I thought he was going to explode. Suddenly, I wanted Dad to be there, just in case. The coach sent Jerry away and took a deep breath. "You're Tom, aren't you?"

I just nodded.

"Well, Tom. I've had boys pull some tricks on me in my time. But what I've just seen is right up there with the best of them. The worst of them, I mean. Swapping places with your brother in the middle of a match? What were you thinking?"

I just shrugged.

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"Did you think I wouldn't notice? Well, I didn't at first, to be honest. It wasn't till after your brother scored that I got a good look at him. But I was bound to find out. And what did you think I'd do then?"

I just looked at the floor.

"I should be sending you on your way now, telling you that you've missed your big chance. But, right now, I'm not sure that'd be the best thing to do. What you did was wrong but, somehow, it seems to me like it was right, as well. We've had brothers together at Shelby before, but I don't think I've ever come across one who'd do what you did. You really wanted to give him a chance. And because of that, *you're* going to get a second chance."

I just grinned.

"Your brother can join the under-11s when we get them started. And you can join the under-12s from this time next week."



At that moment, Dad arrived. I was still grinning, still speechless. I ran off to tell Jerry what the coach had said. As I went, I could hear him talking to Dad.

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"Ah, you're Mr Barlow, aren't you? I'm Dan Farley, one of the coaches here at Town. I think you and I need to have a chat about those boys…"



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