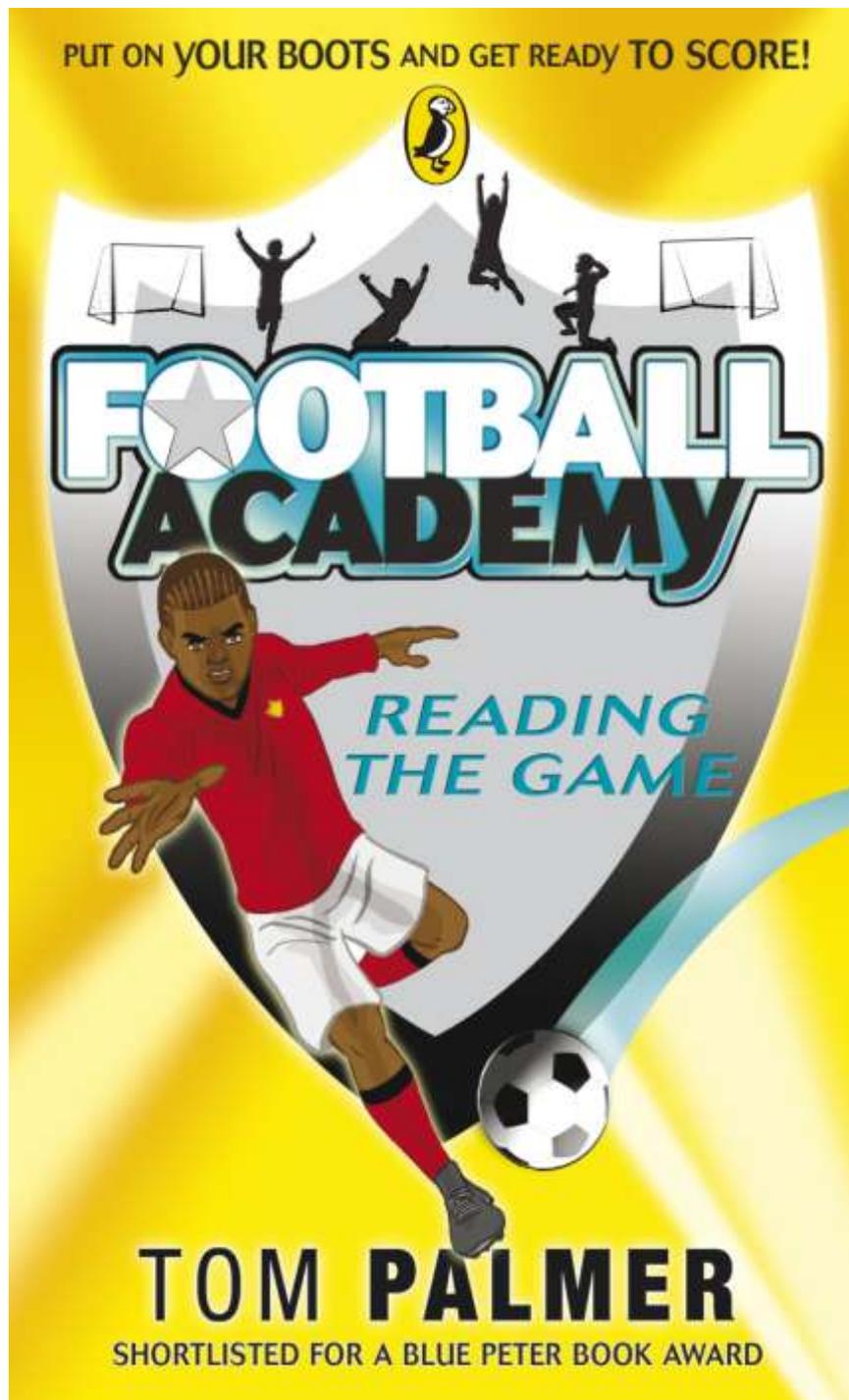


TOM PALMER

FOOTBALL ACADEMY 4 : Reading the Game



**Put on your boots and
get ready to score!**



Teamwork

Ben could see what Ryan was going to do before he did it. He knew how his friend liked to play football.

Ryan would trap the ball, then look up, ready to play it forward. To his left, or to his right.

He always did that.

So Ben sprinted up the pitch, his arm in the air, shouting 'Ryan!'

And just as he thought, Ryan controlled the ball and played it forward to Ben's feet.

Now Ben had three options: run with the ball, pass it back to Ryan, or play in another team mate who was moving forward too.

Ben knew who would be moving forward.

Yunis would be making a direct run into the area.

Will would be drifting to the far post.

And Jake would be in the space behind the Manchester City defenders on the other side of the pitch.

He looked up. The defenders had gone with Yunis and Will, back-peddalling desperately. As a result Jake was in loads of space.

So Ben played it to Jake, cutting the Manchester City defence in half. Ben could see what would happen next too. United would score.

Jake took the ball to the touch line, side-stepped his defender and slid the ball to Yunis' feet.

Yunis did the rest, clipping the ball in. Low and hard. The Manchester City defence was all over the place.

1-1. That was better. At least they weren't losing now.

This was an important game. The first for the under twelve's since coming back from a tournament in Poland.

United's under twelve's were all really good players. The best in their region. United were a top side in the Premiership. And some of this under twelve's team were expected to become professionals in a few years time. Maybe even internationals.

Ben watched Jake and Yunis celebrating in the penalty area. They always looked odd together. Little and large. Jake was small and thin: Yunis tall and muscular. The two of them turned and did a thumbs up to Ben.

Ben smiled. He loved playing with these two. He knew their games so well. They were good players: always in the right place at the right time.

Then Ben looked at the parents. A row of figures in cagoules and jumpers at the far side of the fields. They were standing behind a cordon, a line of string stretched the length of the pitch. On the opposite side of the pitch to the United coaches and substitutes.

Then Ben saw his own family.

His mum leaning on the pushchair. The baby, Tom, sleeping. His brother and sister, Molly and Cameron, four and five, kicking a small ball about, falling over, laughing.

Ben's mum waved to him and grinned. She knew he'd set the goal up. She *knew* about football. She'd taught him how to play when he was younger than Molly or Cameron. When he was her only child. After his first dad had walked out.

Ben gave his attention back to the game. Now United could try to win it.

They'd been a goal down since the first minute, when James, the central defender, had made a terrible mistake, letting one of the Manchester City attackers break into the penalty area, unmarked.

It was so out of character for James to let something like that happen. But Ben knew that everyone made mistakes. Even the team's best player, which James definitely was. As well as being the son of a former England international.

Manchester City retrieved the ball for the kick off. There were ten minutes left.

Ryan came over to Ben.

'Nice one, Ben,' he said. 'That ball you played to Jake. Not bad.'

'Cheers,' Ben said, beaming.

Ben was always happy to get praise from Ryan.

Ryan was the team captain. And a good mate. They were in the same class at school too.

Sometimes Ryan could be a bit mean to the other players. But recently - since United had been back from Poland - he'd been a lot better. Less likely to make trouble.

But Ben knew he had to focus on the game.

Manchester City were about to kick off. United could still win it. Or, lose it.

Panic

'Right lads.'

Steve Copper had gathered the squad together, sitting on the grass in a goal mouth. Monday evening.

The training pitches were next to a large wood and alongside a river. On the other side of the river there was a stately home with posh gardens and a visitors' centre. Ben had visited the place several times as a boy.

After they'd had warmed up with runs and some close passing, Steve addressed them.

'First of all: the game yesterday,' he said. 'Very good. Maybe we didn't win, but the teamwork was great. The way you played together. Excellent. And I thought Ben had a great match,' Steve said. 'He really read the game superbly. I was very pleased.'

Ben grinned and looked at Ryan. This felt good. He liked being praised. And in front of the rest of the team.

Ryan made a face like he was angry with Ben, but then he grinned.

'Here's what we're going to do, tonight,' Steve said. 'More work on options. In front of goal. Trying to set yourself up so you can cope with more than one thing happening.'

Steve arranged the boys up in groups in a penalty area. With Tomasz in goal.

Each boy had to run towards the penalty area and Steve - standing on the penalty spot - would throw the ball either to his left or right. Then the player had to shoot first time.

The idea was to predict which way Steve would throw the ball. Then to adjust your footing if you got it wrong. And, of course, to score.

In the dressing rooms after training Craig and Ronan were holding a sheet of paper.

Chi was a midfielder at United. A calm player. One of the older boys. Craig was a defender. The team joker.

'Ben, have you seen this?' Chi asked.

'It's a match report on yesterday,' Ronan added. 'It's all about you. Ben Blake this... Ben Blake that...'

Ben smiled. This was great. More praise. He could get used to this. He wanted one of them to read it to him.

Then Ronan came across and handed it.

Ben felt his heart begin to race.

But he took the sheet of paper. This was what he knew he was meant to do. He sat down and stared at the sheet. It was covered in words. He nodded and smiled for a minute or so - taking as long he thought it might take to read it. Then he made to hand it back to Ronan. But Ronan looked surprised. 'What about the end bit?'

'What?' Ben said. He was feeling sick now. He looked at the page again. The words were swimming across it. In his panic, he couldn't make *any* of them out.

'The end bit. Read it.'

'I'll.. I'll read it later,' Ben stammered.

'Later? Read it now. It's about *you*.'

Ben could feel his face getting hot. And the skin around his neck. This was his worst nightmare come true. Everyone at school knew he was stupid. But at the *football* people thought Ben was okay. Even clever.

Now he was about to lose the one last place in the world where people didn't think he was stupid.

'Get lost, Ronan. If I don't want to read it, I won't. Okay?'

Ben moved forward and pushed past Ronan.

Ronan looked confused, staring at Ben in disbelief. And Ben could only stand there. Like a statue. Not knowing what to do or say next.

And then the paper was snatched from his hand.

Ben turned, ready to fight now. If someone was going to mock him he'd get the first blow in.

But it was Ryan. The only one who could help.

'Let's have a look,' Ryan said, not stopping to let anyone else speak. 'Blah blah blah... Ben Blake had his best game yet for the under twelve's... blah blah blah... his reading of the game was as good as you'd expect from an under 18... Blah blah blah... United will have high hopes he'll make it as a professional if he carries on showing this level of maturity...'

Ben didn't know what to feel. Thrilled to have such things said about him? Stupid: for pushing past Ronan? Or sick with shame: that Ryan was stood there reading it out for him.

Because Ben had this thing. A secret that his busy mum and his absent dads - even his teachers - didn't know about.

Ben couldn't read.

Ben is happiest playing for United, and he's getting top marks from the coach. But every day at school is a trial for Ben, as he struggles to hide a huge secret from his teachers and classmates. Then Ben's secret starts to affect his game. Can he swallow his pride and ask for help before he's put on the bench - for good?

Read on. *Reading the Game* is available from libraries and all good bookshops. Audio version available.

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