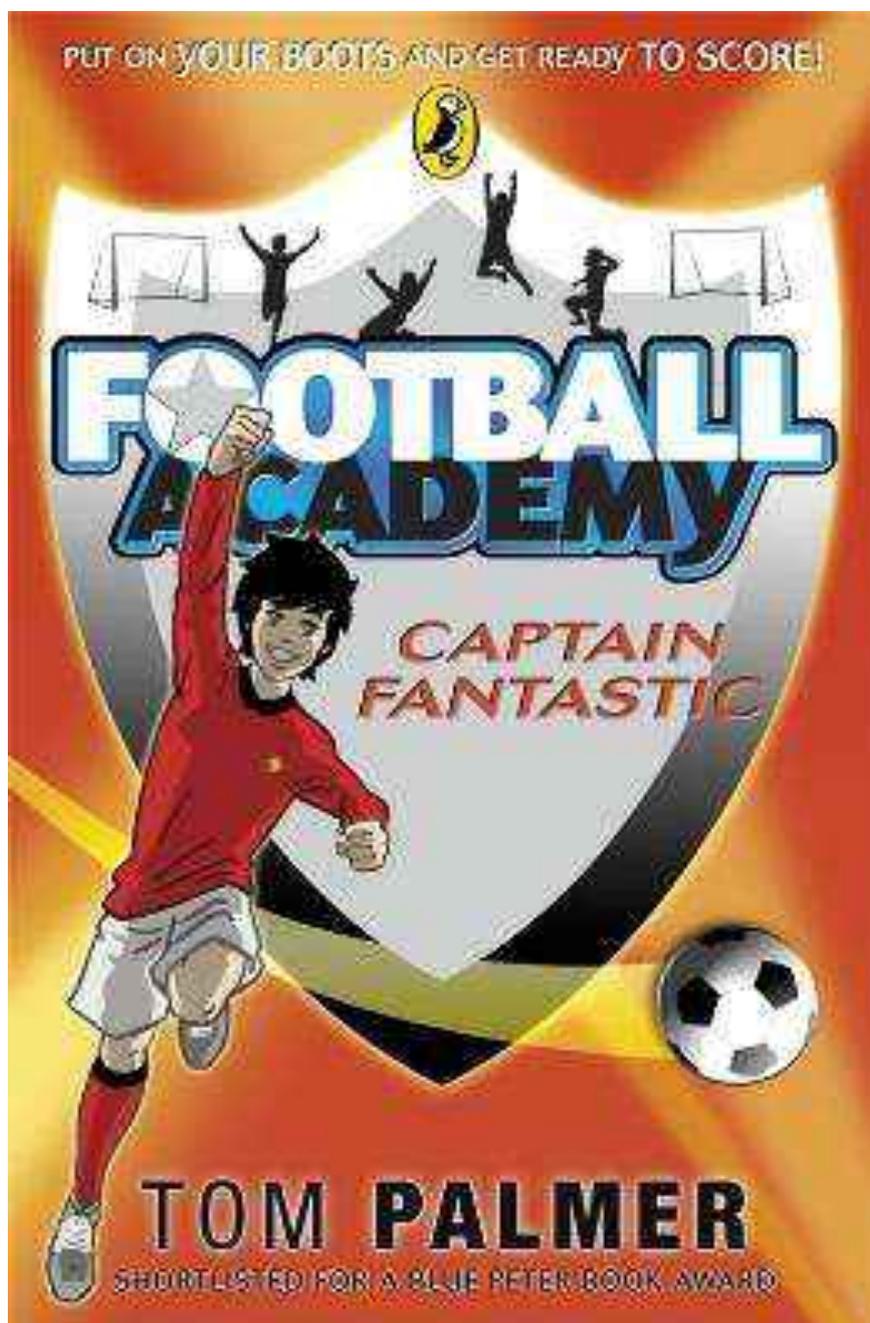


TOM PALMER

FOOTBALL ACADEMY 6 : CAPTAIN FANTASTIC



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



The Best Team in Europe

The first game of the new year was not going well. At least, not as well as the *previous* year had ended.

In December, just before the Christmas break, Premier League United's under twelve's had won a tournament in London, beating both Arsenal and Chelsea. And not long before that they had beaten Real Madrid. They had been written about as one of the best under twelve teams in Europe. A crop of players that would go all the way.

But today they were at Tranmere Rovers. And they'd just let a third goal in.

0-3.

Ryan - the team captain - was furious. But not with his team mates: with his mum.

She was on the sidelines shouting, like she often did. Arguing with the referee. Questioning the under twelve coach' tactics. Making Ryan feel embarrassed.

The referee blew his whistle for half time as soon as the third goal was scored. And Ryan's mum went quiet.

Once the players had gathered on the touchline and were having their sports drinks, Steve, the under twelve's manager started to speak. He was medium height with dark hair and a deep voice.

'Right lads,' he said, pausing. 'This is not going well.'

Ryan - the team captain - smiled. He liked his manager. He knew he'd handle this well.

'But don't worry too much,' Steve went on. 'We've had a lot of changes

since the last game. Only Ryan is left from the defence we played against Chelsea.'

Ryan dropped his head. He knew Steve wasn't meaning to blame him. But he felt responsible. He was captain, after all.

But Steve was right about changes in the team. They'd lost their best defender - James - who had decided to give up football. Their first choice full backs were still in Ireland, celebrating the New Year. And the stand in left back was in a really bad mood.

But Ryan still felt responsible.

'We need the midfield to protect the defence more in the second half,' Steve said. 'Don't worry about getting this game back. Let's just keep it tight and try to win the second half. Yeah?'

Eleven lads nodded.

When they were back onto the pitch, Ryan went around the players to fire them up. Especially Tony who had replaced James in central defence.

Then Ryan went over to Craig. Craig was a big lad with wild hair and a ruddy face. He normally played left midfield. Ryan knew that he had to handle this carefully. Craig had been difficult recently, as if something was troubling him.

'Keep it up, Craig,' he said. 'It's hard dropping back into defence, but you're doing a good job helping Tony out with that striker.'

Craig shrugged.

'Really, you are,' Ryan said. He was worried about Craig. Craig barely spoke these days. He always seemed to be angry and brooding.

Ryan patted Craig's back. 'You can handle this striker. I know you can.'

'I'll handle him, alright,' Craig said, grinning.

Ryan wasn't sure what Craig had meant. But once the game got started again, he didn't have time. The Tranmere forwards were all over them again. And then Craig did what he had told Ryan he was going to do.

The Tackle

The next time the troublesome Tranmere striker got the ball he ran at the United defence. He easily beat Tony, who just couldn't match his pace. Then Craig ran at him.

Craig was a good player. He could play left back or left wing with ease. He could tackle and he had a lot of pace for a big lad. He wasn't a dirty player. Normally.

But as the striker pushed the ball into the penalty area, Craig lunged at him. Two-footed. Making no attempt to reach the ball. Just the man.

It was a wild challenge. The striker went down hard. And he didn't roll about. He just lay there. Not moving. Something was wrong.

Ryan Flynn is Captain of the United under-twelves. He's had a difficult time at home and because of his bad behaviour he has been in some trouble with his team mates. But now he has grown up. He has realised that to be the captain, he has to support his team mates, not boss them around. Now he has to face his biggest challenge. Craig is having problems at home himself. But he isn't telling anyone about it. Can Ryan help him and live up to the name... Captain Fantastic?

Read on ...

Follow Ryan's footballing adventures and live the dream in Captain Fantastic by Tom Palmer available at bookshops and libraries.

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