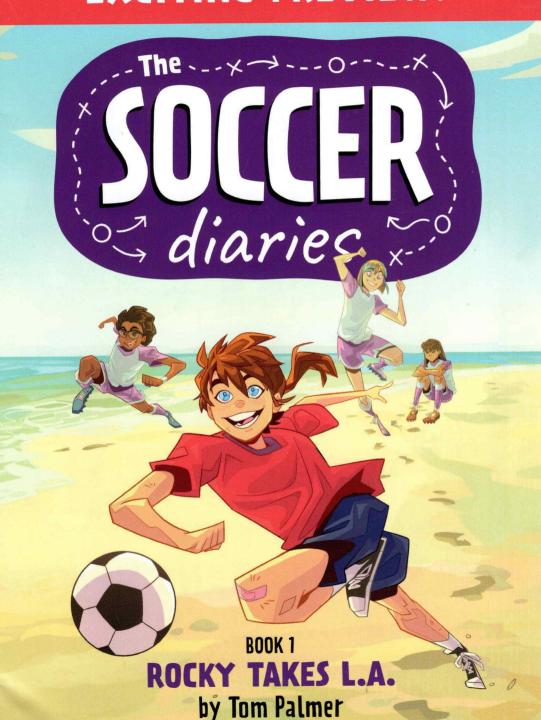
EXCITING PREVIEW!



*SOCCER

ROCKY TAKES L.A.
by Tom Palmer



ROCKY RACE KNEW she couldn't afford to get injured.

All she had to do was play the next ten or fifteen minutes without a knock or a break or a tear. Avoid twisting her ankle, studs-up tackles, catastrophic collisions.

And then?

Los Angeles. California. The United States of America.

This was the insane truth. An unbelievable time ahead of her. A footballing dream made up of ten days playing soccer in the sun. Of being coached by a former USA international captain. Of attending a state-of-the-art sports college five minutes from the beach.

The beach. The sun. California. Words echoing round her head.

But Rocky knew she had to stop thinking about L.A. Her mind needed to be on the game. On now.

The team Rocky and her Melchester Rovers teammates were playing against were coming closer to scoring with every attack. Defeat was almost inevitable, as they were a club from two leagues above and were overwhelming Melchester Rovers Under 18s. So much so that Rocky—who was a midfielder, a breaker-up of play, a distributor of the ball—had been forced deeper and deeper, determined to protect her defence.

And it had worked. For eighty minutes. The score remained nil-nil. A huge achievement.

But now they had reached that part of the game where legs are tired and mistakes are made. Ten minutes away from not losing to a much better-placed team, there was no way Rocky was going to go easy. How could she even be thinking about avoiding injury?

And now, a fast player from the opposition, who had been coming in off the wings more and more with marauding runs, was really starting to unbalance the Melchester defence.

Rocky could hear the winger's coach shouting.

"Run at them... attack... tear into them!"

And the winger was.

Here she came again, no longer passing with her teammates in the neat, sophisticated triangles that had characterised their first half. A patient, cultured build-up had not worked. It was time for direct action. Rocky saw this.

Rocky would stop this.

The speedy winger, with just two touches of the ball, bypassed the Melchester midfield on her own, and now had just Rocky and the two out-of-position defenders to beat.

It was the perfect counterattack, three teammates streaming alongside her, giving her options.

"Overload!" the opposition coach yelled. "Overload!"

Instinctively, Rocky sensed that the winger would not pass to one of her teammates. This girl believed in her abilities so much she was going for the goal.

Not on my watch, Rocky thought.

And—as the winger touched the ball ahead, just a foot too far—Rocky rushed her, timing her tackle so well that she nudged the ball away and into touch, just as the winger swung her leg to smash the ball goalwards.

There was a thud.

Then a scream.

Then pain.

Not much pain. But some. Rocky lay there knowing she'd been caught by the winger. They were both on the ground, lying next to each other. The smell of grass. Then more pain came as Rocky made to sit up and she felt the winger's hand on her shoulder.

"Stay down. Your leg."

Rocky looked into the winger's eyes, confused, then at her leg, her sock dark.

With blood.

Lots of blood.

Is it broken? Rocky thought to herself. Was her trip to California in jeopardy?

The beach. The sun. The dream.

And now pain was tearing up her leg, flooding her body, as her sock became darker and darker with blood.



BACK AT HOME, Mum took off the bandage that Rocky's coach had put over the gash on her leg.

It was only a wound. Not a break. Nor a deep wound either. But Rocky was still worried that her mum might not let her go to California.

It was too hard to tell, these days. Too hard to read Mum.

Rocky used to be able to judge what her mum

would think and say in advance. How worried she was, what she would allow and not allow. How far Rocky could push something before she became cross.

But that was not the case now. Everything was different. Mum was unreadable.

It had been a time of changes at home. A year ago—after a long illness—Rocky's dad had died. She had been fourteen. And now her mum was a widow. At the same time, Rocky's brother, Roy, had become a professional footballer. That meant he was away. A lot.

Strange times, Rocky thought to herself.

On the whole, she did everything she possibly could to make her mum calm and happy, untroubled. But sometimes she forgot about Mum being a widow altogether. Until she was suddenly struck by guilt.

Had she mistreated her mum? What would Dad say? It was all so confusing. So worrying.

So annoying. And Rocky had no one to talk to about the guilt. Or the grief, come to that.

Mum bathed Rocky's shin gently. There was a ten-centimetre gash in between the shin bone and the muscle. It had happened after the shin pad she'd been wearing had somehow been ripped out of her sock.

The wound throbbed and stung as Mum bathed it. But Rocky pretended it didn't hurt. She was desperate to play it down. She had worked so hard to get a place at the soccer school in California. She'd proved her fitness. Competed against dozens of other girls. She'd persuaded her brother to finance it, promising to pay him back. Mum just had to let her go.

"Okay?" Mum asked, studying the wound. "Fine," Rocky winced.

The wind was blowing outside, thrashing rain against the bedroom window. All that weather coming off the moors and hills where they lived.

Northern England, in the Pennines. Wuthering.

"So are you going to go?" Mum asked.

"What?"

"To the States?"

"Isn't that up to you?" Rocky was confused.

"It's your trip," Mum said. She sounded tired.

Rocky felt a flash of something. Anger or fear. She wasn't sure which, or where it had come from. But she didn't like it. Or herself when she was like this. But she couldn't stop it.

"You're the mum," she snapped.

Mum smiled. "You're bound to be nervous." "I'm not."

"So what's the problem? From the day you heard about the soccer school you've been up and down about it. Really excited sometimes. Then not. Then... I don't know. I don't get it."

"No," Rocky scowled. "You don't."

She knew she sounded mean. But what could she do? What if she told her mum she wasn't

worried for herself at all? Well, she maybe was a bit worried for herself. Would she fit in? Would she meet someone she could have as a friend? That kind of thing.

But the big one. The big worry. That was Mum. Rocky's guilt about leaving her mum. But how did you explain that?

"I'm going, Mum. My leg's not broken. I'll be fine."

"Good." Mum smiled.

"Good," Rocky said back and Mum ruffled her hair.

LATER, ROCKY STUDIED herself in the full length mirror on the landing of their terraced house.

Dark hair. Pale skin. Not tall. A frown. She was wearing her travelling clothes. Loose jeans. A hoody. No logo. She hated logos.

So it was happening?

For the last ten days of the school summer holiday, Rocky Race was going to California, to play football.

About the Author

Tom Palmer is a best-selling children's author from Leeds, England. He has written dozens of books for children, including the Football Academy series, and continues to inspire young readers up and down the UK. He supports Leeds United.

MEET THE SQUAD!

Rocky Race is travelling from the UK to the USA to follow her footballing dreams and attend the most amazing Soccer Camp! Let's meet the Squad!

ROCKY RACE

- **® British girl in Los Angeles!**
- Determined and tough.
- **Section** Section Sect
- Likes fair play on the pitch and playing as a team.



Ideal for readers aged 7 - 12 years old.

















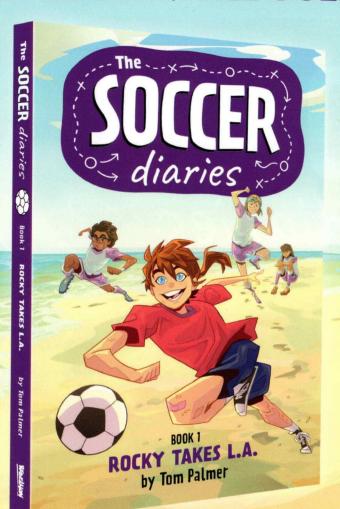






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EXCITING PREVIEW!









Rocky Race is going to be the best soccer player in the world!

Rocky Race is not your average fourteen year old. She's determined, ambitious and the best football player you've ever seen. So, when she gets a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend a prestigious soccer camp in California, USA, she takes it. But far from home, Rocky suddenly finds herself out of her comfort zone. Fake friends, her own anxieties and a brand new world with strange rules all threaten to derail her new life before it's even started — does Rocky have what it takes to succeed?

The Soccer Diaries is a brand new series starring Rocky Race, a British footballer looking to make it big in a US soccer school. Perfect for fans of *Up For Air* and *Squad Goals!*











