

Enjoying Reading through Sport

Tom Palmer disliked reading at school but, through a passion for football, his mother managed to instil a drive and ambition for reading. He is now a successful author and shares with *Attain* why reading is so important.

TOM PALMER



I AM A CHILDREN'S AUTHOR WHO VISITS OVER TWO hundred schools a year, including many independents. When I visit I always start by asking the children 'Who likes books?' Normally about half the hands go up, while other children make gestures to suggest they're not sure. Some, though, keep their hands conspicuously down. And they are usually boys. If an author had come into my school and asked did I like books, my hand would have stayed down too. Throughout my school years I didn't read for pleasure. The words reading and pleasure did not go together. As a result, my mother watched me do increasingly badly at school, finishing with three O levels in a family that averaged nine. Also, I lacked any general sense of ambition or drive. Except when it came to football. I failed exams. I drifted out of school. I was unemployed. Things were not looking good. So my mother decided to get me into reading. Using football.

She started me with newspapers. Then football magazines, football fact books, football quiz books, player biographies and fiction about sport. It took months, but gradually I became a more confident reader. I started looking out for things to read myself. I became more able to concentrate on a book and read more than a few pages without losing focus. My mother had

encouraged me to read using what I was passionate about. And it worked. I read, not because reading was good for me, but for pleasure. I became a reader. Once reading came to me so did passion, ambition and drive. And – later – a career in bookselling, libraries and writing.

The Passionate Reader

As a result of my experience, I believe that a person becomes a passionate reader not through thinking that books are good for them, but through reading about what interests them. For me it was football: for others it can be rugby, wizards, dinosaurs, monsters, fairies, cars, ballet, horses, pets. You name it. In schools I host a session called the Football Reading Game. Half quiz about football reading, half penalty shootout, it ends with a team of children winning a football trophy. I talk a little about my books. But mostly I encourage the children to tell each other what they love to read. It usually works.

Stockport Grammar School recently emailed to say: 'After your visit it was lovely to hear the children's excitement ...it was such a boost to their love of the written word and I cannot thank you enough.' That made me feel it was worthwhile. So did the comment from Nottingham High School: 'The best thing was that it has encouraged some of the more reluctant readers in

4, open every day, save statutory holidays, from 8.00am to 6.00pm. Today that facility has over 100 names registered, has added a new building and is securing a throughput into our Reception year on year. Waiting lists exist up to 2011 for that class. Having determined the vision and agreed the resulting strategy, the school had to communicate its message to a variety of audiences. There are both internal and external audiences who need to be engaged. How and when you communicate is also of vital importance; carrying your audience with you is essential. I have found that the creation of our Parents Forum some four years ago, as a conduit between parents and governors, allows not only parents to have their whole school concerns raised and reported to the full governing body, but has also allowed me to ask parental opinion on initiatives, ideas and possible developments.

It is important to have courage in your convictions. That said, there is a myriad of issues to address. Are the reasons for change valid, if yes, what is the time line? How will this be funded? How will it affect the pupils and their learning environment? What will the reactions be of constituent parties, teachers, parents and the alumni? By addressing the questions that each party may rightly ask and ensuring that appropriate answers can be given to each, which are interlinked, helps enormously. Clear and consistent responses must be prepared so that key messages are delivered. Some resistance to change is almost inevitable but by careful preparation all but the most reluctant can usually be persuaded. In other words we need to anticipate people's concerns and answer them clearly and emphatically before any presentation to any directly involved group.

The presentation is vital, if one constituent party finds out before another, the risk factors are raised. Consideration of the medium for presentation is also of primary importance – public presentation, a letter, newspaper, and the website? Each has to be considered and probably a combination of each method used to ensure the delivery and the successful outcome. All is in the preparation and joined up thinking. As the hours drew nearer for our big announcement of an evolutionary co-education, the tension grew. Had we overlooked anything? How will people respond? The response we received was a total surprise; 'why haven't you done this sooner?'

I look back on that moment nearly four years ago and realise that the success came from understanding our market, the constituent parties and thorough preparation. Yes, there have been pot holes along our journey and we continue to plan assiduously, ensuring our evolution and preparing to answer the questions before they are asked. Planned in this evolution was the move to evolve into a co-educational facility from the bottom. Guarantees were given to all those parents who had signed up for an all boys school, as Birchfield was, that they would at least remain within an all boys class. Our girls will in September 2009 have travelled through to Year 3; numbers joining Reception in 2010 show equal numbers of boys and girls.

As Salopian Captain Webb said 'nothing great is easy'; heads and governors have to make brave decisions. Together, you have to model your school to fit the

demographics and the market. We all need a business model which works and particularly now one that will permit us to emerge from the current financial maelstrom the stronger and better equipped to invest in the future and keep our school happy, confident and moving forward. Those decisions, though difficult at the time, have proved to be sound. We constantly review our position in order to anticipate future trends.

We also seek initiatives that have benefits across the school. There is an advantage in being a relatively small school in this respect as we can act quickly to seize opportunities if they contribute to our strategic approach. A recent example has been the creation of a 'closed' professional business network forum for our parents, through the facilitation of 'LinkedIn'. The original idea was suggested by a parent who has experience in this area. Parents who did not know each other are now making contacts through wider networkings and doing business together. The value added is considerable.

We are also seeking to broaden the payment options open to parents. We will, in line with the new regulations on qualifying child care, be accepting commercial child care vouchers for a range of extra curricular activities provided by the school. We also provide a meal ordering service for all parents. In this time-deprived world, convenience and value added is increased; collect your child at the end of the day and your supper.

Parents want their child's school to do well; they have commitment and loyalty, knowledge and understanding, multi-skill sets and connections and more often than not a deep desire to be involved, particularly when they are asked or invited to contribute. Occasionally, as Heads we have to be tactically agile, but by doing so one can often seize the moment, grasp the opportunity and rise to the challenge. Yes, in our right-sizing and evolution to co-education, we have had to invest in cultural change, curriculum development, improved and appropriate facilities. It remains vital even in these unprecedented economic times to invest proportionately in the future, in order that in the future savings can be made. Ultimately, when economic matters start to settle that investment will pay off and permit investment in the bigger projects once again.

Putting one's head in the sand is not an option. Successful outcomes emerge through vision and controlled evolutionary strategy. At Birchfield we believe we have had the vision and action to change our school through evolution. We continue to have a highly successful, happy and purposeful establishment which is always striving to provide the very best for every child inside and outside the classroom. This aspiration remains constant, what we do know is that through vision and strategy, we are a different school today than five years ago, and that with continued vision and action, we can continue to enhance our reputation, be aware of the pertinent risks and evolve into the next stage of development, comfortably and confidently. As our strap line reads, 'Securing the best of the past with an eye to the future.'

Richard P Merriman is the Headmaster of Birchfield School, near Wolverhampton.

the group – especially when Tom talked about how he got into reading.’ If I can help enthuse reluctant readers, be it through my books or my talks, then I’m happy.

Practical Ideas

As well as the Football Reading Game, I and other authors have run some of the following activities that have tried to achieve the same ends. Here are some ideas I’ve gathered:

- run an after-school football reading group for football fans only (sometimes mixed with football coaching)
- use older children to act as role models to younger ones, recommending books and other reading materials
- get the children to talk about their reading loves – and hates – in front of each other, be it books, magazines, or websites
- run a sports book display around time of tournament or big game
- invite an author to visit and talk about his books

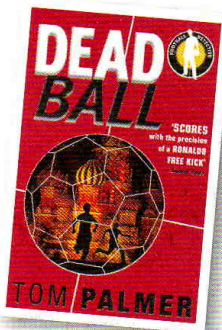
Although schools can do excellent work to encourage children to read through sport, it is at home that reading for pleasure is usually kicked off. These are the kinds of things parents can be encouraged to do (if they are not doing them already):

- read sport related newspaper articles with your children
- be seen reading by your children
- read books aloud to them from birth – and don’t stop once they go to school
- let them choose sport-related reading materials in bookshops and libraries
- see the Reading the Game website which lists books that famous footballers enjoy
- encourage them to email a writer about reading and writing and football – they’ll reply

There are hundreds more tips like these on *www.literacytrust.org.uk* – and some fascinating research on boys and reading in particular.

Empowered by books

In my first book for older children, *Foul Play*, the hero Danny wants to be a detective. He learns all his detective tricks from the pages of crime novels he reads to his blind father. As a result he is a skilful detective. I did this because I wanted Danny to have been empowered by books. Just like I was empowered by books. Just like I think children can be empowered by books in schools and homes up and down the country.



Tom Palmer is the author of two football series for children. The Football Academy series for 7+ and the Football Detective series for 9+. His latest book 'Dead Ball' was published by Puffin in August 2009.

He visits schools all year round. His website is www.tompalmer.co.uk