

Top of the League

Using Football to Encourage Reading in Schools

by Tom Palmer



World Cup 2010

Spring and Summer 2010 present a brilliant opportunity to tackle reluctant readers – because on 11 June football's World Cup finals begin in South Africa.

The media will be saturated with it.

TV adverts will be exploiting it.

As will children's authors. But I'll come on to that later.

Not all boys are reluctant readers. Not all reluctant readers like football. But a lot do.

The National Literacy Trust did some research in 2007. They found that 68% of junior school girls say they like reading; as opposed to 46% of boys. But they also found that only 6% of girls say they like to read about sport. But that 46.5% of boys say they do.

There is already a lot of work going on in libraries and schools using football to encourage reading. The National Literacy Trust runs several schemes under the general heading, Reading the Game. Many authors go into schools to encourage reading through sport, including Helena Pielichaty, Mal Peet, Alan Durant and myself. This article is about some of the activities I have been involved in and have heard about. Specifically projects that have worked in schools. It ends with some tips for using the World Cup to encourage reading.

My Story

Briefly, I need to tell my story. I was a reluctant reader. I hated it. I did badly at school. My mum was desperate. I was heading into early 1980s Britain with nothing. So she decided to use the one thing I loved to get me into reading – Football.

She got me reading newspapers, magazines and – after a while, when I was more confident – books. It worked. And things started to change for me. Sadly she died before my *Football Detective* and *Football Academy* series were published by Puffin. But she left me with a burning desire to evangelise about reading, through football.

I was empowered by reading. My life got better. I stopped doing stupid and dangerous things. I got back into education. I got jobs I liked. I got self-esteem.

And that's a lot of what my books are about. The *Football Detective* series is about a boy who loves football and who wants to be a detective. He wants to be a detective because he has read a lot of crime novels to his blind father. It's what they do together. And, because of that, Danny is equipped with all the skills of detectives like Kurt Wallender, Sherlock Holmes, Maigret and many more. He uses these skills to solve football crimes across the UK. He, like me, has been empowered by books. And that is what I try to do in schools. I go in and try to use football to encourage a love of reading.

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Premier League Promoting

The National Literacy Trust and Football Foundation run a scheme called Premier League Reading Stars. The main project is about getting families together in public libraries to talk about reading. But there's a spin off for schools. A chart with 100 gaps to fill. Each time a child in the class finishes a book, one of the gaps is filled by a football sticker. Once they complete the chart the class wins a treat. Often a trip to a football club's learning zone and a stadium tour.

Interested? Contact ralph.newbrook@footballfoundation.com to take part.

The National Literacy Trust also has sets of posters of footballers, such as Rio Ferdinand and David James, reading. Great for library walls. Contact jim.sell@literacytrust.org.uk for those.

And if you do have a Premier League team in or near your council authority it might be worth approaching your local children's library team to see if they are looking for a school to recruit families from in spring 2010.

Football Reading Clubs

I work a lot with a school in Basildon, 250 miles from my Yorkshire home. Ghyllgrove Junior. I go back so much because I love what they are doing there. They run a football reading club. Fifteen children who love football and need a bit of help with reading. Or a lot.

They meet once a week. Sometimes I'm there. Sometimes they do writing work. Sometimes putting together their football scrap books. Sometimes we take them out to libraries, bookshops and once to David Beckham's football academy. They read first drafts of my novels and tell me what I need to do to make them better.

Their literacy has rocketed. As has most of their confidence.

They feel special. Because of reading.

The Football Reading Game

The Football Reading Game is something I created for school visits. It helps to have me there to do it, but is very easy to set up and run yourself.

It is a game of two halves. In the first half children are put in teams and challenged to answer questions on football reading.



Headlines from the day's newspaper, with words blacked out.

Football magazine covers. Name the player on the cover. Why is FourFourTwo called that?

Football book covers. Which player is this book about? Which team? Blacking out the appropriate words.

Read a section from a football novel and ask them about one of the details in the story at the end.

The teams accumulate points. Each point they earn equals a penalty. Then the teams play each other in a penalty shoot out. The winners get a small trophy or some other prize. And they feel good.

This is a great event for making children more aware of what sports reading is out there for them. But the best part is to ask, before each round, what they like to read in newspapers, magazines and books. It creates peer to peer recommendations. The best form of recommendation.

Peer to Peer

I have seen other great examples of teachers using older children to inspire younger ones to read. These are the best examples.

In one school a head teacher got the school's coolest and often most difficult boys into his room. He asked them if they'd like six foot photos of themselves on the walls of the school. They agreed. A week later the photos appeared. Photos of these notorious boys reading books about sport, about music, about other things.

It was part of his plan to create a reading culture in the school. The boys became greater celebrities and reading became a little less uncool.

The buddy system in schools is much used. Some schools focus it around reading. Older children are matched with younger children with similar interests. Then they spend a few minutes a week reading together – and talking about the books they've read. Another way of making reading seem more important.

The best example I've seen of this in action was the football reading club in Basildon. After a year of attention the Year 5s were all far more into reading than they had been before. In most cases their class scores had rocketed. And at the end of



the year they had an assembly to celebrate their achievements. The older children came to the front to tell the rest of the school about their favourite books. As they came up to talk I watched the younger children gaze in awe at their heroes. You could just tell everything they said about books and loving reading was going in, and was influencing the choices the younger children would be making in the next year and beyond.

Talk Sport

There are several types of guests you could invite into the school to talk about reading sport.

I once worked with a young journalist on the Newcastle Echo who was from the city. He talked about how he goes to matches home and away, knows the players, gets to watch training. It was inspiring to see the children in the classroom suddenly realise they could be like him and have his job in years to come if they read about football.

I'd definitely recommend a journalist of the local paper. After their visit you can encourage the children to read his or her articles and reports by putting them on a display in the school. Some schools have invited in local policemen, firemen and other urban heroes – including footballers on local teams – to talk about sports reading to children.

And, of course, you could invite a children's author. All children's authors do different activities. All of the ones I've seen are great at it. I can recommend Neil Arksey, Helena Pieliachy, Alan Durant, Mal Peet, Nick Toczek and myself, all who have written about football.

Check out their websites. Some spell out what they do in schools. Authors cost between £200 and £400 a day, plus expenses and can be a really great way to kick start the reading habit.

Playing Away

As well as having guests coming into school, it can be good to get out of the classroom to inspire football reading. If you're able to get through the red tape and finances of it all. I've run trips with classes to:

- go on a tour of a local football stadium
- visit a sports club's learning centre
- set up a sports reading treasure hunt in the local library
- if you have some money to spend on books, to take the kids to a bookshop to choose stock
- arrange for a football author event in a library, so the children meet an author and become familiar with their local library.

More ideas for exploiting the 2010 World Cup in your school library.

- Have an interactive World Cup wall, made up of newspaper match reports, magazine posters, a World Cup chart.
- Invite children to bring in sports books and magazines for a swap stall.
- If you have a good book stock – or can get support from your School Library Service – create a special World Cup library, with football books, books about the countries taking part, etc.
- Create the image of a large goal on the wall of the school library or classroom. Invite children to fill in book review sheets shaped like footballs. If they liked the book, get them to put it in the back of the net. If they didn't, they can have it going wide of the post.
- Create your own Premier League Reading Stars chart specifically for the World Cup, using your own books and with a daytime World Cup party around one of the afternoon matches as a reward.
- Have a set of 20 football books, and when the kids read one ask them to give it points as in football – 0 if they hated it, 1 if they thought it was okay, 3 if they loved it. Then keep a league table in the class to see which is the most popular book.

Final Whistle

The above are just some ideas you can use in the classroom and school library, to add to what you are already doing. The websites below have many more such ideas and, often, resources you can use:

- <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk>
- <http://www.footballfoundation.org.uk>
- <http://www.readingthegame.org.uk>

Thanks for reading. I hope this gives you some ideas that you can use in your school.

- *Tom Palmer is the author of two series about football. Both published by Puffin. Football Academy, which is about an under-twelve Premier League academy, the six books including Boys United and Striking Out. It is aimed at 7+. Football Detective (9+) is about a boy who tries to solve football crimes. Titles include Foul Play and Dead Ball. Foul Play was a 2008 Booked Up title and was shortlisted for the Blue Peter Book Award. He works in hundreds of schools and libraries a year, running his Football Reading Game. His website is www.tompalmer.co.uk.*

