

JAMIE JOHNSON

BORN TO 
PLAY



DAN FREEDMAN

I

Over His Head

Thursday 14 October

The ball was in the air.

Jamie had his back to the goal.

He knew he had to try it.

If he pulled it off, if he scored with an overhead kick in front of everyone in the playground, Jamie Johnson knew it would be one of the best moments of his life.

It would shut up Bryn Staunton and Tyler Forbes for days and it would prove, once and for all, that he was easily the best player in the whole of Year Seven.

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Although he had all the other skills, Jamie had never done a proper overhead kick before – but he knew he had to go for it. Now.

Jamie kept his eye on the ball, as it seemed to hover above his shoulder. Then he launched his body into the air to meet it.

Jamie flew high above the hard cement of the playground, his body soaring towards its target.

In the air, he snapped his legs back over his head in a scissor-like motion, just as he'd seen the best players do on TV.

He closed his eyes and waited for the contact with the ball. He wanted to hammer it home. He waited and hoped for the sweet sensation of the perfect strike.

But it didn't come. He felt his left foot barely scuff the side of the ball, slicing it sideways. And now, gravity played its part, dragging Jamie back down to earth with alarming speed.

Jamie crashed back down onto the gravel with a loud, wet, painful thud.

His mind screamed with anger, while his body stung with the pain. The entire layer of skin on Jamie's kneecap had been scraped off.

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The blood from his gravel-filled knee started to spill through the hole in his trousers.

Jamie Johnson was going to be a big star one day. He just knew it. He wanted to be a professional footballer when he grew up. And not just any old professional footballer. He wanted to be the best. He wanted everyone in the world to know who Jamie Johnson was. And sometimes, if he closed his eyes and concentrated hard enough, he could already imagine the fans singing his name:

One Jamie Johnson... There's only one Jamie Johnson...

But that was not the song that the other boys were singing in the playground today.

Instead, as Jamie wiped his dirty, wet hands down his bloodied trousers, Bryn Staunton and Tyler Forbes were singing:

"He's small, he's thick, he can't do overhead kicks! He's Jamie Johnson, Jamie Johnson..."

This was easily the second most embarrassing moment of Jamie's life. The only time that beat it was the day when, at his primary school, Wheatlands, he had wet himself at the end of assembly – in front of the whole school. That was

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horrendous, but this wasn't far behind. Jamie didn't mind looking like a fool in lessons, or people taking the mickey out of him for wearing old clothes, but he never thought the day would come where people would tease him about how he played football.

He wanted people to think of him as a football genius. But right now, he looked like a football chump.

These matches at break-time were the most important part of the day for all the footballers at school. If you were on the winning side, you were king for the rest of the day. If you lost, you knew you wouldn't be allowed to forget it.

Bryn Staunton and Tyler Forbes – the two biggest boys in Jamie's year – always made sure that they were on the same side in break, and they never picked Jamie. Ever.

It wasn't because he wasn't good enough; in fact, it was the exact opposite. It was *because* Jamie was the best player in the whole year that they had it in for him.

"Forget about them," said Hugo Bogson, the only real friend that Jamie had made at The Grove so far, helping Jamie up. "They're idiots."

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“Thanks,” said Jamie, carefully avoiding Hugo’s outstretched hand, which was filthy.

They were mates and Jamie appreciated Hugo sticking up for him, but he also knew that Hugo was one of the dirtiest people he’d ever met. Jamie always tried not to touch him directly.

Still, no matter how weird Hugo Bogson was, he wasn’t ever horrible to other kids in the way that Bryn and Tyler were. In fact, Jamie had never seen Hugo be mean to anyone, and that’s what Jamie liked about him.

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Wish List

It took Jamie ages to get home from school. He missed the bus and had to stand waiting in the rain for 20 minutes for the next one to come. He was drenched to the bone by the time he got in.

Some of the other kids called their mums and got lifts home, but Jamie couldn't do that. His mum was on a late shift at the hospital. She wouldn't be home until 10. And anyway, even if she was home, she couldn't have given him a lift. Her car was broken. It had just been sitting uselessly in the drive for the last six months and now it was going to cost way too much to fix.

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Sometimes, Jamie felt sorry for his mum. It was a horrible feeling to have. He knew you shouldn't feel sorry for your parents.

Jamie wondered how he would feel if his mum got married again. Some kids had issues with their stepdads. But Jamie wouldn't mind. He just wanted his mum to be happy. If she wanted to get married again, that would be fine by Jamie – as long as the bloke was a Hawkstone United fan. That would be his only demand.

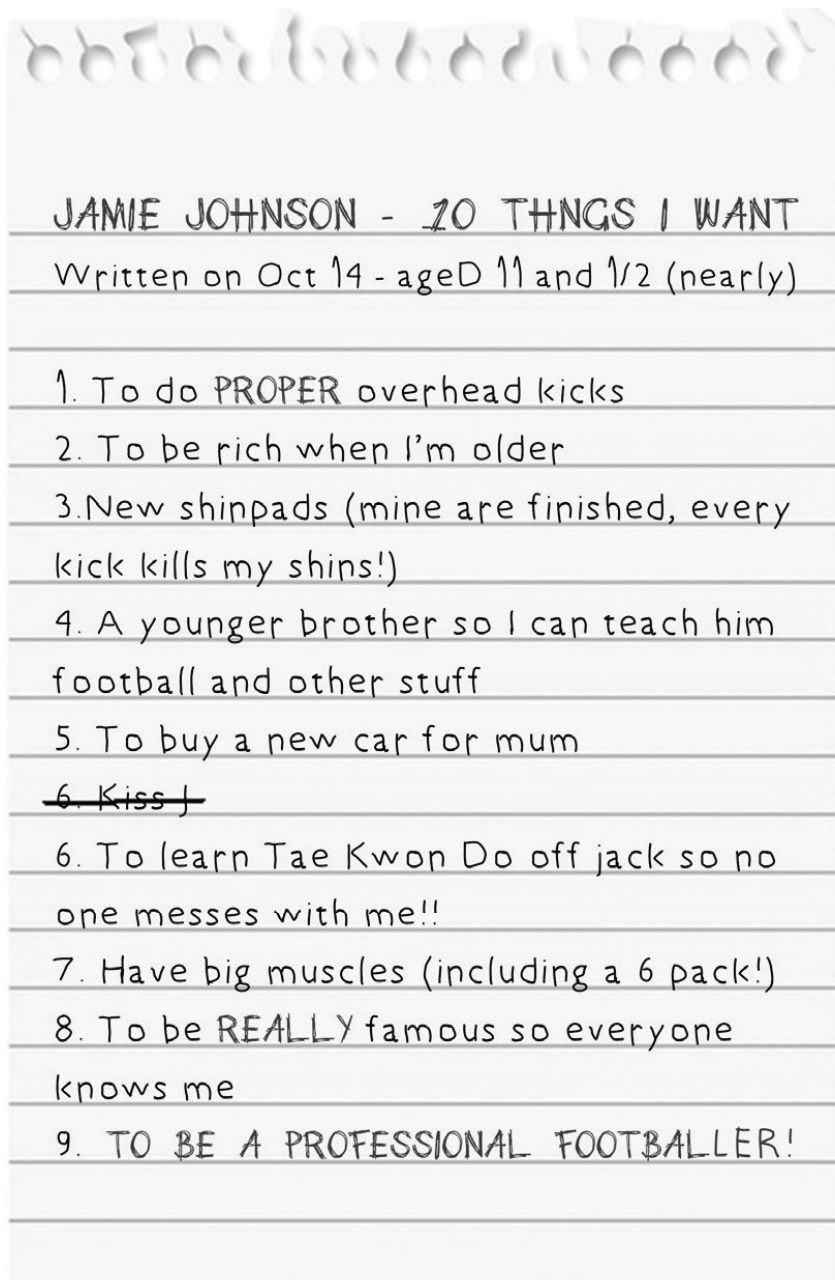
Jamie put the chicken and noodles his mum had left him into the microwave and turned it on to full power. Then he checked the time: 8.18p.m. His granddad, Mike, would be over soon to check he was OK. He always did that when Jamie's mum was working. It was cool; they just watched TV together and Mike let Jamie watch whatever he wanted.

In a way, it was good that Jamie's mum wasn't home. If she had been, Jamie would have had to explain the state his trousers were in and then his mum would have got angry about buying a new pair.

"We're not exactly rolling in it, Jamie!" he could imagine her saying.

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While his dinner was cooking, Jamie ripped a piece of paper from the pad next to the phone and sat down on a stool in the kitchen. He began to write down his wish list of things that he wanted to happen in his life:



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The ping of the microwave went before Jamie had written down number 10.

He'd fill that one in another time. Plus, if he could achieve number nine then nothing else would matter anyway!

If he became a professional footballer, Jamie Johnson could have everything he wanted.

That night, as he got into bed and turned out his light, Jamie's mood darkened. He'd had a good evening with Mike but now, just as he wanted to get to sleep, he began to feel unsettled. His thoughts and worries were swimming like evil sharks around his mind.

He tried to fend them off by focusing on good things, like football. He asked himself questions: how much money would his favourite team, Hawkstone United, spend in the next transfer window? What would his top world 11 be?

Normally, football kept the bad feelings away. But tonight, it was no good. The negative thoughts were taking over his brain...

Why did his life have to be so hard? Why couldn't he have a nice, easy life like the other kids?

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Two parents and a car that worked – was that too much to ask for?!

Jamie didn't want to go to school the next day. He didn't want to be the butt of any more jokes. He didn't even want to be Jamie Johnson any more.

Maybe he should give up playing football and do sprinting instead. The athletics coach at school had said that he was quick enough to be a professional sprinter; that if he trained hard, he could go to the Olympics... But athletics wasn't Jamie's sport. He loved football. He always would. And Bryn and Tyler were trying to stop Jamie doing what he loved most.

The wind was tapping angrily at Jamie's window now. Jamie could almost hear it whistling, taunting him, just like the others had done in the playground:

*He's short, he's sad, he doesn't have a dad...
He's Jamie Johnson, Jamie Johnson...*

As he pulled the duvet tight around himself, Jamie felt the sting of a tear prick the corner of his eye.

But, as he wiped it away, a surge of determination sprang up inside him.

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He knew exactly why Bryn and Tyler targeted him: Jamie played left wing in The Grove's school team and left wing was Tyler Forbes' position too. So, as long as Jamie was playing, Tyler couldn't get in the team. He and Bryn, being best mates, had made a plan to try to get Jamie out... to try to stop him playing football altogether.

Jamie's granddad, Mike, had warned him this would happen; that he would always be a target for people who weren't as good as him.

They were jealous of his talent. They were jealous because they wished they could do the things with a football that Jamie could do.

"Never give up," Mike had always told him. "Just keep coming back for more. And if someone ever tries to make you feel small, you stand up for yourself!"

Jamie turned over and clenched his fists into his chest.

Bryn and Tyler wanted to stop Jamie doing what he did best. They wanted to stop him playing. But Jamie wouldn't let them. No one would ever stop him playing football.

It was time for Jamie to stand up for himself.

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The Sandwich

Friday 15 October

When the bell went and everyone went outside for break, Jamie decided to stay in the classroom for a bit. Hugo was staying inside too. Maybe Jamie would see what Hugo was doing at the weekend.

It wasn't as if Jamie didn't have other mates outside school – of course he did. For a start, he had Jack – the best mate in the world. She and Jamie had been best friends all the way through primary school and Jamie only really felt like himself when he was chilling with her.

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But at The Grove, Jamie pretty much just had Hugo.

He and Hugo had kind of just been thrown together. They lived quite near each other and, by the end of the first week at The Grove, they were the only two who didn't belong to any of the gangs. So they decided to form their own gang. Of two.

They didn't exactly make a scary pair, but at least it meant they both had someone to go around with, and they always sat next to each other at lunch.

Not that they had a whole lot in common.

Jamie was quite shy, especially with people he didn't know that well, and Hugo ... well, there was no other way to say it... Hugo was a little weird.

He took delight in the strangest things. Bogies were a particular delicacy for him, whether they were his or someone else's!

But, above all else, Hugo's number-one speciality was farting. He could do all sorts: silent, potent, eggy ... but he was a real expert at the loud ones. His best ones sounded like a duck quacking!

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He was so proud of each fart he did that he wanted to tell the whole world about them.

“Can you smell it yet?” he’d ask Jamie when he’d let rip, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

If Jamie had a pound for every time that Hugo had asked him to “pull his finger”, Jamie would already be a millionaire!

Jamie stared as Hugo carefully unwrapped his sandwiches. Jamie felt like a scientist studying a wild monkey.

As soon as the sandwiches came out of the silver foil, the smell immediately invaded Jamie’s nostrils.

They smelled like poo! They reeked so badly, Jamie thought that he was going to heave. Then he saw that brown, jellied juices were beginning to drip down the side of the bread...

“Man! What’s in that sandwich?” Jamie yelled, covering his nose as Hugo tucked in. “It looks like dog food!”

Hugo Bogson just stared back at Jamie. He didn’t say anything. Instead he just smiled, and then he took another big bite of his sandwich.

“I’m sorry, Hugo, but that’s rank!” laughed Jamie. “I’m going to play football!”

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And with that, Jamie practically sprinted out of the room.

It was a cold, wet day and the air from Jamie's mouth immediately froze into white clouds in front of him. They were so thick it looked as if Jamie was breathing out smoke.

Jamie thrust his hands into his pockets to keep them warm. Most of the other kids were wearing gloves. But Jamie didn't like wearing them. They made his hands feel trapped.

The match had already started and the players on either side were running about after the ball like madmen. None of them were holding their positions. They just all swarmed around after the ball.

In the middle of the playground, someone had been sick and the caretaker had put a load of sawdust over the top of it to soak up the liquid.

"What's the score?" Jamie asked, standing on the side of the playground. "Which side shall I go on?"

He wished that someone would just ask him to be on their side. He wished that for once he could be part of a gang at The Grove. Not always an outsider. If his mum had listened to him and

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sent him to Kingfield with Jack then he wouldn't have any of these stupid problems.

"Who said you can play anyway?" shouted Bryn, coming across to confront Jamie.

"Free country!" Jamie shouted back. "Who made you king?"

"Right," shouted Bryn, "let's get him!"

Suddenly Bryn and Tyler sprinted over to the heap of wet sawdust. Then they grabbed some of it in their gloves!

And now they were running towards Jamie with balls of sawdust and sick pressed in the palms of their gloves, ready to release. It was as if they'd invented a new game called sickball! Except Jamie didn't have any weapons of his own.

But he had something else. His pace.

Jamie immediately hit top speed, twisting and swerving in different directions to avoid his pursuers.

Bryn and Tyler knew there was no way they would be able to catch Jamie in a straight race, but they had two against one, so they split into different directions to make sure that they could trap him.

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Soon they were coming at Jamie from either side. He was cornered. He had to stop.

“OK, guys,” he said, putting his hands up. “You got me. But you don’t have to do this, you know.”

“Course we don’t have to do it, you idiot!” Tyler sniggered, looking at the disgusting parcel of sick and sawdust in his glove. “*We want* to do it!”

“Guys, really... trust me, you don’t,” said Jamie, looking to his left and his right as an idea suddenly came into his head. It was such a good idea that he couldn’t help but start smiling.

“What are you laughing at?” shouted Bryn angrily. “This’ll shut you up!”

And simultaneously, he and Tyler Forbes launched their sick missiles at him.

Jamie had half a millisecond in which to work, if he was to get his plan right. As soon as he saw the rockets heading towards him, he ducked as quickly as he could. He could feel the breeze of the sickballs whoosh over the top of his head.

The rockets just missed him, and each other, as they crossed paths in the air. Instead, they carried on their journeys. By the time Bryn and Tyler

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actually realized what was happening, it was too late! Their own sickballs were heading straight for them, and there was no time for them to get out of the way!

SPLAT!!

The sickballs smashed into their faces and oozed down the side of their cheeks. Some went in Bryn's hair and it looked as if some had even gone into Tyler's mouth.

While they were still in shock, spitting sawdust out of their mouths and wiping sick off their faces, Jamie stood up and pointed at them.

"Who's stupid now?" he laughed. "Serves you right!"

Then he started running back to the school building. It was almost time for lessons.

He knew they'd chase after him.

But he also knew they'd never catch him. Not today, anyway...