

**Also by Dan
Freedman**

*Born to Play
The Kick Off
Shoot to Win
Golden Goal*

man of
the
match

DAN FREEDMAN

 SCHOLASTIC

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Rats

**Friday 22 January - The middle
of the season**

Jamie was sure he could hear rats scurrying beneath the wooden floorboards of the manager's office at Seaport Town Football Club.

Rats, with their hairy little feet and their big sharp yellow teeth. Rats, crawling around with their noses twitching.

Jamie Johnson was in the third division of English football and he was sharing a football club with rats.

It was Jamie's first day at Seaport Town and he was waiting to meet his new manager, Raymond Porlock.

All Jamie wanted was to get back. Back to Hawkstone United. . . back to the Premier League. . . back to where

he belonged. . .

Just a few months ago he had been a star. He'd been football's golden boy, with the world at his feet.

But, right now, all Jamie had at his feet were those disgusting, filthy rats. . .

Jamie shook his head and blew into his freezing hands.

What on earth was he doing here? How had he fallen so far?

Rewind - four months earlier

The beginning of the season

2

Top of the League

Saturday 12 September

Hawkstone United v Aldwich City

Live commentary from the Premier League. . .

“And Jamie Johnson has burst completely clear of the City defence once more. . . His speed is sensational! There’s no way the defenders will catch him now!

“Just the goalkeeper to beat. . . This for Johnson’s sixth goal in five games. . . This to send Hawkstone United to the top of the Premier Leaaaaaaague!

“Oh and it’s there! Johnson knocked it in through the keeper’s legs! That’s the cheekiest goal you are likely to see! And another quite sensational strike from

the boy with the golden touch!”

Premier League Table – 15 September

Team	P	GD	Points
1. Hawkstone United	5	+11	13
2. Aldwich City	5	+7	11
3. Larchester Rangers	5	+6	10
4. Crayhall	5	+2	9
5. Foxborough	4	+7	7
6. Brockburn Rovers	5	+6	7

Top Scorers – Race for the Golden Boot

Johnson 6
Rodinaldo 5
O’Kane 5
Afikware 4
Volpone 4
Rouzel 3

It was a boiling September afternoon. Hawkstone United were top of the Premier League and Jamie Johnson was fast becoming recognized as the best young player in the country.

Nothing could touch him. This was where he’d dreamed of being his entire life.

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“Put the radio on, will you, Doug?” Jamie asked, as his driver pulled out of the Hawkstone car park.

Jamie had listened to the match reports on the radio since he was a young kid. He and his granddad, Mike, had always gone to watch the Hawkstone games together and then given each player marks out of ten on their way back.

Then, when they’d got home, they would switch on the radio to see what the pundits thought.

The only difference now was that Jamie was the player they were talking about on the radio. . .

“I’m pleased to say that we’re now joined by the manager of Hawkstone United, Harry Armstrong,” said the radio presenter.

“So, Harry, you may be the youngest manager in the Premier League, having just hung up your own boots, but with thirteen points from five games, the league table must make pretty good reading for you tonight.

“And we have to ask you about Jamie Johnson! He’s still only seventeen years old, but right now he looks like the most potent attacker in the league. How good do you think this boy can become? Is it too early to start using the words ‘world class’?”

“Well, Pat, every team needs someone to unlock the door. . . to provide that spark. At the moment, Jamie

Johnson is that person. He's a special player for us.

"And people shouldn't forget that it was only a year ago that he was injured so badly that it looked like the boy might not ever play again. Foxborough released him and he came to us. You know that his first job here was washing the kits?"

"My assistant, Archie Fairclough, he has this saying: 'Never bet against Jamie Johnson,' and I'm starting to agree with him."

Jamie smiled, leaned back and looked out of the window. It was true. A year ago, he could hardly walk, let alone sprint away from Premier League defenders like an Olympic athlete.

Now, when defenders faced up to Jamie flying at them with the ball at his feet, he could see the fear in their eyes. And he loved that feeling.

Most of all, though, Jamie loved the fact that Harry Armstrong had called him a "special" player. That filled him with confidence. Made him feel unstoppable.

3

Jack's Back!

That weekend, Jamie Johnson and Jack Marshall were sitting in Sunningdale Park talking about football. It was the same as always. They had been coming here together for ten years, since they were kids at school, causing mischief together.

They were still just as close as they had ever been. Jamie didn't trust many people. He'd been let down too many times in the past, so now he didn't let many people get close to him.

Since Jamie's grandfather, Mike, had died, Jack was probably the only person in the whole world that Jamie properly opened up to. She was the one he would talk to if he had a problem or needed help.

He knew that he could trust her. He knew that Jack

would never let him down.

"Come on, JJ," Jack teased. "Give me some juicy Premier League gossip, then! What's the transfer news?"

Although Jack was studying for her A levels at college, she already knew that she wanted to be a football journalist. "That way, I'll get to go to all the best football for free!" she'd explained to Jamie. And, never one to hang around, she'd immediately got herself a part-time job working at the local newspaper.

"No way!" laughed Jamie. "I can't just tell you secrets and stuff!"

"Course you can! One bit of gossip from inside the Hawkstone dressing room; that's all I need," she said, her big brown eyes fixed on Jamie. "Go on! Tell me! Which players don't like each other? There must be some that hate each other's guts!"

"Come on, Jamie!" she teased, tickling him now, in his weak spot, just below the ribs. "If I can get a good story, then the paper will give me a full-time job after my A levels! And that'll mean I can write loads of articles saying what a wicked footballer you are! See? Everyone's a winner!"

"Get off!" said Jamie, trying to stop Jack's tickling.

"All sounds great, Jack, except for the fact that . . . I can't tell you anything. I tell you, then it goes in

the paper . . . and on the radio . . . and on the TV . . . and on the Internet . . . and then the whole world knows! What happens in the dressing room stays in the dressing room. That's what everyone says. It's like some golden rule in football. If I start blabbing, telling secrets and stuff, everyone'll hate me."

"Yeah, fair enough," said Jack, kicking the grass underneath the bench. "Wouldn't want to put you in a difficult position. And don't worry, I'll get my story in the end. You know what I'm like when I put my mind to something."

"Yeah, I know that all right," smiled Jamie, thinking back to the countless arguments he'd lost to Jack over the years. You could see it in her eyes: a sparkle . . . a fight. Jack was a winner. Perhaps that was why Jamie liked her.

Looking at her, Jamie reckoned that Jack was one of those people who could have been anything they wanted in life. She was good enough to be a top goalkeeper and pretty enough to be a catwalk model.

On the other hand, Jamie knew that *he'd* only ever had one option for what he could be – a footballer. So it was lucky that he just happened to be one of the best footballers in the country.

"Cheers for understanding it from my side," said Jamie. "I know that I'm lucky to have you as my—"

“Oh no!” Jack snapped, before Jamie could finish. “You’re not going to start getting mushy on me, are you? Don’t even go there! You’re an idiot sometimes, Jamie Johnson!”

“And anyway,” she said, suddenly getting up off the bench and running out of the park, “if you want some of that chicken that my mum made for you, you better get your skates on – otherwise I’m having it all!”

Jamie leapt on to his feet and into a turbo-charged sprint. That was his favourite dinner!