



**DAN FREEDMAN**

JAMIE  
JOHNSON



FINAL WHISTLE

 **SCHOLASTIC**





1

# THE BIG MOVE

**WEDNESDAY 22 AUGUST**

"I can't believe it!" Jamie Johnson blurted out as he burst into the hastily arranged meeting at Hawkstone United's stadium. "Is it true? Do they *really* want me?!"

Tony Walsh, the chairman of the club, Harry Armstrong, the Hawkstone manager, and Archie Fairclough, the assistant manager, were already there waiting for Jamie. As one, they nodded back at him.

This time it was for real. This time it was the club that Jamie wanted. Desperately.

The whole summer had been a game of transfer cat and mouse. Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Paris St Germain had all tried to sign Jamie following his stunning performances for Scotland at the World Cup. He was one of the most sought-after players in world football.



And yet, no matter how much money they had offered to pay, Jamie had turned down each one of them. His response had always been the same: there was only one football club in the world for which he would leave Hawkstone United. But that club had never made a bid.

Until now.

Jamie's brain had been boiling with ideas since Archie had called him with the news forty-five minutes before.

This was big. This was huge.

"Barcelona want to sign *me*?!" Jamie panted. His heart was beating so fast he felt as though he'd just played four whole football matches in a row.

This was the team of teams. The club of clubs. The side whose name was etched into football history. The side of Messi. And now they wanted him to join them.

"It's exciting, isn't it, Jamie?" Smiled Tony Walsh. "And a crucial decision for this club too. I think we'd prefer it if we could discuss this matter further ... in private, if that's OK?"

For a second, Jamie was confused, but then he followed the line of Tony Walsh's eyes and understood he was referring to Jack, who, as ever, was right beside Jamie.

"Oh," said Jamie, catching Jack Marshall's eye with





the smile they always shared. "It's OK. Jack's cool. She may be a journalist, but you can trust her. She's my best friend. I'd tell her all this anyway, so she may as well be here now."

Tony Walsh looked at his managerial team, Harry Armstrong and Archie Fairclough, paused for a second and then, with a reluctant cough, carried on talking.

"I hope you are right, Jamie, because some of the information I am about to give you is completely confidential."

"It is true," revealed Tony Walsh as Jack and Jamie sat down. "The Barcelona delegation is preparing to fly in as we speak. The manager, Godal, has requested a personal meeting with you tonight. They mean business, Jamie."

"You absolute beauty!" Jamie shouted, brimming with pride at the notion, his mind immediately leaping forward to imagine pulling on the famous blue and maroon top and scoring a master blaster of a shot in front of a hundred thousand adoring Barcelona fans.

It was almost every player's vision of football heaven.

"You do realize, Barcelona is the only club I would leave Hawkstone for," Jamie said, suddenly feeling a drop of sadness in his sea of ecstasy. "My granddad first brought me here when I was three. No matter



what happens, Hawkstone will always be *my* club."

"We know," Walsh nodded. "In fact, you signing for Barcelona is actually the best gift you can give to Hawkstone at the moment. We need the money, Jamie. Badly."

"What do you mean?" asked Jamie. "What's the problem?"

Tony Walsh pursed his lips and looked at Harry Armstrong and Archie Fairclough. Archie, in particular, carried a troubled expression on his face.

"Look, there's no other way to say this: we're broke," stated Walsh.

"Wow," said Jamie, suddenly understanding why the Hawkstone bosses looked so serious. "But ... how? I mean, we just won the league! We're doing brilliantly. Now we're going to play in the Champions League for the first time. That means we get loads of money, doesn't it?"

"We've overstretched ourselves financially, Jamie. We've been trying so hard – too hard – to get to the top and, even though we're starting to achieve some of our goals, the banks want their money back. Now."

"Right," said Jamie. "How much do we owe?"

"We have a two hundred and forty million pound bank loan. Half of that must be repaid by the end of August," said Walsh, his face grey with worry.



"But that's in, like, a week!" said Jamie, panic in his voice. "What happens if we don't?"

"They'll want to close us down. Or sell us on. It'll be end of the club as we know it."

"Nine days to find one hundred and twenty million?!"

"That's correct, Jamie. As a club, we've got two major playing assets. You and Bertorelli. We need to sell you both and we need the payment in full. We've accepted a bid for Bertorelli from Juventus this morning and now Barcelona have come in with this offer for you..."

"So, me going to Barcelona is actually a good thing for Hawkstone?" said Jamie, the images of him pulling on a Barcelona shirt once again starting to fill his mind.

Tony Walsh nodded. "The last thing any of us want is for you to leave this club. But, at this moment, that is just about the only way we have of saving it." He stroked his chin with his finger and his thumb, casting his gaze towards Jamie's knee. "The only question is, will you be able to pass a medical?"



2

# JOHNSON 11

As he and Jack walked out of the main entrance to the stadium – possibly the last time Jamie would ever do so as a Hawkstone United player – his chest brimmed with pride.

He had been brought up and played football on the streets around this ground, and now the greatest club in the world had come in to sign him.

It was perfect. Or rather, nearly perfect.

Because now Jamie had to tell the fans.

There were two hundred there already. They were being supplemented by new arrivals with each passing second as the news that Hawkstone were negotiating with Barcelona began to hit social media.

The fans were singing with all their might, waving banners as they did so.



"Don't go, Jamie!"

"Hawkstone Loves You!"

Ever since the day he'd been a mascot for the club aged eleven, the Hawkstone fans had taken him to their hearts. They were so proud that a little skinny ginger kid from their streets had grown into not only one of the best players to ever pull on a Hawkstone shirt but also one of the most exciting talents in the world.

They loved Jamie and Jamie loved them.

And now he had to tell them he was leaving.

As soon as the fans saw Jamie, they rushed forward, barely able to contain themselves. These fans were pure Hawkstone. Just like Jamie.

"It's not true!" they begged.

"You're not going, are you?"

"You said all you ever wanted was to play for us in the Champions League, and now we're there you're gonna leave us!"

Jamie looked at the disappointment on the faces of the Hawkstone fans. Suddenly he felt an almost overwhelming desire to cry. He'd only ever wanted to be loved by these fans. He'd dreamed of it every time he and Jack had played football in the park. All those hours of training. All those dreams. Yet, here he was – in their eyes, at least – turning his back on them.

"It's Barcelona," was all he could muster by way of





an explanation. Public speaking had never been his strength. He preferred to do his talking on the pitch. "Believe me – I would not even think about leaving Hawkstone for anyone else. But this is my chance to take my game to the next level."

Somehow his explanation only made the fans more angry. Talking about going "to the next level" seemed in some way to be a criticism of Hawkstone. But that was not how Jamie had meant it. He would never say a bad word about Hawkstone.

He watched a bunch of kids – all in their Hawkstone tops – as they ran off down the street, angrily kicking stray bottles and fast food containers as they went.

"Go then, Jamie!" one of them turned around and shouted.

Jamie recognized the boy; it was Robbie Simmonds. He was from the same estate as Jamie. Jamie had gone to school with his older brother, Dillon.

"You traitor!"

And with that, Robbie Simmonds tore off his Hawkstone shirt and threw it to the ground in disgust.

There was nothing Jamie could say in response. He knew that if, when he'd been younger, his favourite Hawkstone player had announced that he was leaving the club, Jamie would have reacted in exactly the same way as Robbie.



Jamie looked at Jack. They waited until the kids had turned the corner. Then, together, they walked over to where the Hawkstone top lay strewn in the street, like a body on a battlefield.

Jamie bent down and picked it up.

When he saw the back of the shirt, his heart sank.

He turned around and showed it to Jack, revealing the name and number on the back.





3

# BACK WHERE THEY BELONGED

"Are you a hundred per cent sure about this, Jamie?" asked Jack, spitting on her gloves and smacking her hands together as she jumped up and down on the goal-line. "You don't think it's too soon?"

Jamie didn't answer the question. Instead, he smashed the ball high up into the air. He had to do this and Jack knew it too. They had both been thinking about it during the meeting and she'd been the one who had brought it up almost as soon as they'd left the Hawkstone ground.

"But what about your knee, Jamie?" she'd asked, before the Barcelona bubble got too big and burst. "You haven't



even kicked a ball since the World Cup, which, let's not forget, you came back from on crutches. How long did the docs say you should rest for if you wanted your knee to get back to normal? Six months? And that was only a month ago. Won't Barcelona be checking it out? It's got to show up in the medical, hasn't it?"

"I know," Jamie had said, each of her questions pricking his happiness like sharp needles into full balloons. "I know all of that. That's exactly why I need your help."

By "help", Jamie had meant that he needed Jack to have a kickaround with him – like in the old days. Her in goal and him belting in the shots. He'd know in the space of five minutes whether his body, or more specifically his knee, was up to passing a medical to sign for Barcelona.

Although it had been a few years since they had played together in the park, it felt like the most natural sensation in the world for Jack and Jamie to grab a ball from Jamie's house and head down to Sunningdale Park.

This was where they had honed the skills and the passion for football that would dictate the rest of their lives – Jack as the best young female reporter in football, and Jamie as one of the world's most exciting young talents, albeit with a knee that seemed to be ageing and hurting more by the day.

He'd been advised in the strongest possible terms





by the doctor for the Scotland National Team that the only way to fix his knee was complete rest. For at least six months. Only then would his injuries have time to heal. But Jamie had no time for rest. Not with Barcelona flying in tonight.

The plan was pretty simple. Jamie was going to go at this kickaround hard. Shots, sprints and skills. He needed to try out the lot. If they were all there – as good as ever – then he would know that the move to Barcelona was on. If he broke down, if his knee gave way, then the move was dead. And so was Hawkstone.

Jamie watched the ball drop from the sky. His football brain – the computer in his head – instinctively switched itself on to analyse the flight, pace and angle of the ball's descent. He arched his body backwards, offering his chest as the perfect cushion for the ball to land on.

He juggled the ball from shoulder to shoulder before letting it drop to his famous left foot. He swished his boot towards the ball, lashing it with his instep high and fast towards the top corner of the goal.

It sang through the air, arcing through the late-afternoon sun in search of its target before the topspin kicked in to provide the last-minute dip.

However, between the sticks was no ordinary goalkeeper. Jack Marshall knew Jamie Johnson, both as a person and as a footballer, better than anyone. Almost as





soon as Jamie had begun his juggling routine, she'd seen the volley coming. She had started back-peddalling towards her goal a full couple of seconds before Jamie had even struck the shot. She skipped across the turf to ensure she was now in the perfect position to tip the ball nonchalantly over the crossbar with what appeared to be only the merest exertion of effort.

"Fluke!" shouted Jamie. "You only saved that 'cos you knew what I was going to do!"

"Being prepared is part of the game!" responded Jack, feeling their friendly rivalry start to reignite itself. "Anticipation's what gets you ahead in football. I always say that when I'm coaching my girls team. Why? Is that the best you've got?"

Those words alone were enough to fire up Jamie's starter motor. Jack was already on her way behind the goal to collect the ball, but now Jamie was sprinting in the same direction. His pace was electric as he flew across the grass.

The wind whistled in his ears as he exploded forward. Jack turned to see Jamie coming but it was too late; he was past her in a flash, getting to the ball first and flicking it directly back over her head before running the other side of her to collect it.

Jamie stood there smiling, his foot resting on the ball. It had always been the same: him and the ball – together.

Both he and Jack knew that the pace he had just





shown was not something that any normal footballer could replicate. But this boy wasn't normal. He was special. And he was ready.

"That enough to convince you I can pass the medical?" he said cheekily, even blowing Jack a mischievous kiss – such was the confidence he felt with the ball at his feet.

"Nope," responded Jack immediately. "Still need to see the overhead kick to know you're really ready... And actually, if you don't mind, I think I might film you doing it so I can show it to my team when I'm coaching them this week!"

The overhead kick had always been something unique between Jamie and Jack because, although it was now one of Jamie's trademark moves and something the Hawkstone crowd insisted he demonstrate in the warm-up before every home game, it had actually been Jack who had learned how to do it first. Then, when they were eleven, she had taught Jamie.

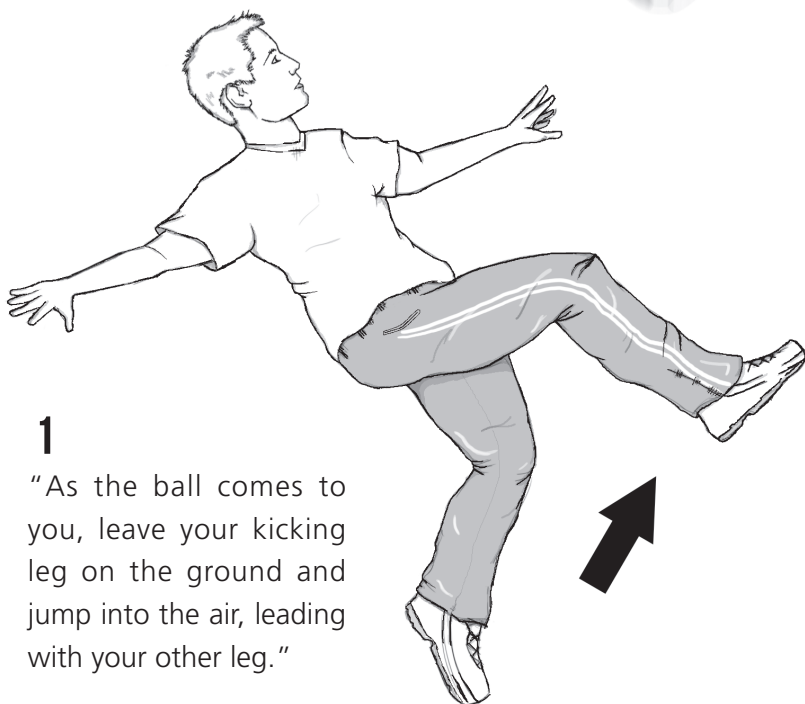
"OK! I'm filming!" announced Jack, holding her phone towards Jamie. "Right, everyone, you may well recognize the boy on the screen now. His name is Jamie Johnson. Yes, THAT Jamie Johnson, and he's very kindly agreed to show you all how to do the overhead kick. Because he's been able to do it for eight years now ... ever since a brilliant *GOALKEEPER* showed him how! OK, Jamie, remem-



ber to tell us what you're doing as you're doing it and ... take it away!"

Jamie stood on the edge of the area and watched as Jack looped the ball towards him. Once again, the football computer in his brain took over, plotting the speed and path of the ball and calculating the optimum moment for him to launch himself into the air.

Then it was show time – with Jamie explaining exactly how he did it:



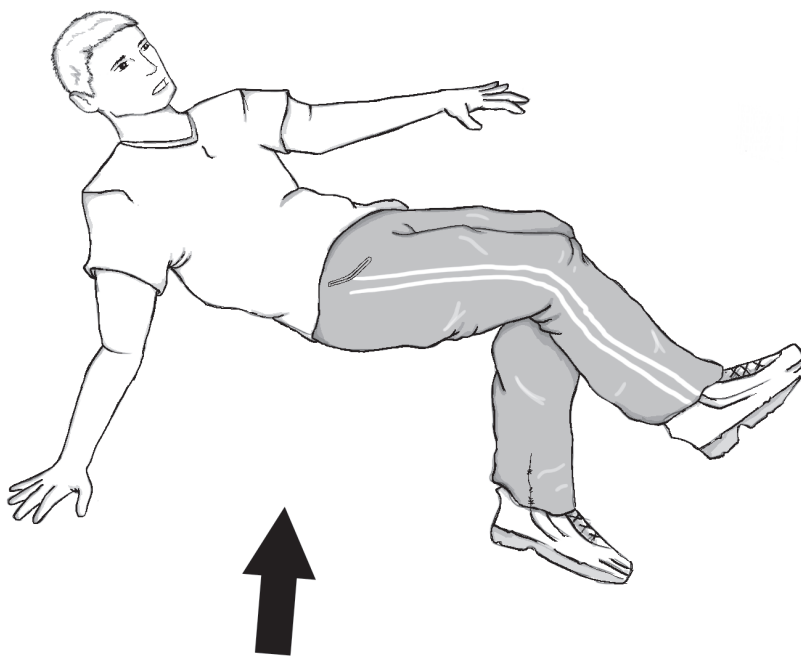
**1**

"As the ball comes to you, leave your kicking leg on the ground and jump into the air, leading with your other leg."





## 2 “Keep your eyes on the ball. . .”



As you fall, “bicycle” your legs ...  
your non-kicking foot goes back  
down ... and your kicking leg  
comes up towards the ball...





**3** "Strike the ball with your laces!"





The kids that Jack coached were lucky because it just so happened that Jamie executed what was probably one of the best overhead kicks he had ever produced. It soared with the power of a rocket right into the roof of the net. He could not have caught it any cleaner.

“Not bad,” smiled Jack, saving the video and putting the phone back in her bag. “Shame Barça weren’t here to see that one. They’d have signed you on the spot, even if you only had one leg... So how does it feel?”

Jamie looked down at his knee. It wasn’t right. It probably never would be. He hadn’t played a game of football without pain for three years. And the problem was getting worse, not better.

But Jamie knew there was enough left in the tank for him to pass this medical and sign for Barcelona.

There had to be.