



THE

FROM FANTASY FOOTBALL
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

UNKNOWN

TO THE TOUCHLINE
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CHAMPION

A REAL LIFE STORY

RUI MARQUES

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R U I M A R Q U E S



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WHY AM I TELLING MY STORY?

Nowadays anyone can write a book. Just go to a bookstore, have a look at what has already been written and you can write a successful book. But there are countless examples of books that offer nothing of interest or anything new to the reader. There are many books on the shelves about people who have become celebrities without any real talent, and they don't have anything interesting to tell, but there are also books written by quality writers, those who are truly gifted, who have become famous and have built a reputation for creating magnificent tales of fiction or writing their own exciting life stories, which we all love to read. I'm not a celebrity, but I have a great story to tell that's not the result of my imagination, it's real! So, why not? I don't need to create a storyline or use my imagination for anything. My challenge is to write well and tell you what happened to me, hopefully expressing the emotions I felt as best I can. I have decided to tell my story because I think it's something special, unique. I didn't need favours nor did I rely on luck, I was able to win because of my talent and hard work. There were times during the writing of this book that I thought of giving up because I didn't think I'd really triumphed or

that I could provide great moments of interest to the reader. But in the end I decided that my story might be interesting enough to keep the reader reading. If characters of fiction can become idols, even though their characteristics and actions are not real, then hopefully my true story can be of interest. If I can inspire or make someone happy, I'll be glad.

I have a good educational background, I was taught to have good principles and values, and have never underestimated the importance of hard work. Like the vast majority of people of my generation in my home country (I have lived in Portugal since I was born in 1979), I was told by my parents that I should focus on studying to earn a college degree so that I would be successful in life. That was great motivation during my childhood and teenage years, so I was a good student, got good grades and went to university.

Unfortunately, when I was ready to enter the working world, I began to realise that not only was my degree (in economics) not enough to guarantee a job, but also that I would not be able to make a difference working in this area. Why did I think this? The simple answer is because I had no passion for finance or any of the subjects that surround it. Working in this field would not bring out the best in me, so I would never really achieve great results. I tried to fool myself for a while, to be honest, and I was not a strong enough person to question whether the path that my parents had recommended to me was the right one for me. Luckily, fate was on my side and I found my way to a better career and future for me. It was maybe a little late, as I was in my mid-twenties by the time I realised, but it was still well in time to pursue my new goals. There are people who

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know from childhood what they want to be in life, while others spend their lives looking for something and never find it. Now I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones.

I've always loved football, and also competition, so the perfect match for me was fantasy football – a competition in which participants act like coaches and build teams based on the available players from a given league and score points according to the performance of their players. I can recall my earliest memory of football and I know where and when it was: I was listening to the report of a match on my father's car radio when Portugal won against the Soviet Union back in November 1983 and qualified for Euro '84. However, despite the strong connection I've had with football since then, I could never have imagined the happiness that this sport would bring me in the future. The title of this book is *The Unknown Champion* because I managed, against the odds, to win in fantasy football competitions, which were my showcase, then someone gave me an opportunity in the football industry. In this competitive world I've managed to keep on winning, but still nobody knows who I am. Today, I can say that I was the first person (and probably the only one so far) to win the top prize in fantasy football competitions in two different countries, England and Germany. Within three years, I won 'You The Manager' in the *Daily Mirror* in England in 2009/10 and the 'Super Manager' competition in the *Bild* newspaper in Germany in 2012/13. These and other victories are detailed in this book.

In the summer of 2013, after winning the German competition, I started to believe I could achieve my goal of working for a professional football club. Today, more than five years later, I am in my sixth season as a talent scout, working firstly with Estoril Praia from Portugal

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for two years, then I worked for Sporting Kansas City for three and a half years, an American team in MLS. Both clubs have already signed players recommended by me, and these players have been successful. Now I am starting a new challenge with Legia Warsaw, the current Polish champions. Although I continue to work in the financial sector in a full-time job, I manage my time carefully so I can be successful in both fields. My goal is to work just in football, and every day I take another step towards this. So, this book will also provide details of my scouting career so far.

People who might be interested in reading this book are not necessarily football lovers. If you are interested in fantasy football or scouting then this book could be a good reference for the future. The purpose of the book is not to give tips to succeed in these areas, but I will detail those things that have led to my success, so there will be some wisdom and knowledge. But anyone who appreciates a good story based on willpower, intuition and discipline should enjoy reading this book.

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FOOTBALL AND ME

During my childhood I experienced some very strong emotions thanks to football, and most of it was positive. This book does not detail every flashback from my first football memories and experiences, but some of them are important because it is likely that they were the basis of the success that I experienced decades later.

I was always fascinated by the play-by-play live football reports on the radio. I remember going on Sunday walks with my grandparents and always taking a small blue radio with me. Sometimes I glued it to my ear, literally. It was my way of following all the action and hearing all the goals scored each afternoon, in a time when all the matches used to be played simultaneously. I loved to memorise the team line-ups and I would repeat them to myself as if I were singing a song. Although my Grandfather Adão was a Sporting Lisbon supporter, I began to develop affection for their rival team – Benfica. This may have been the influence of a neighbour of my grandparents, who was truly passionate about football and Benfica, but also because I was born in the borough of S. Domingos de Benfica, close to the stadium.

I clearly remember learning in March 1984 that football can be so cruel; I had such great expectations watching

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a European Cup (today the Champions League) match between Benfica and Liverpool. I started to watch the game on TV, but Liverpool scored early on. Then they added a second goal and continued to annihilate my beloved team! My parents convinced me to go to bed and I followed their advice, knowing that Benfica would lose the game for sure. The next day I found that, no surprise, 4-1 had been the final result. The following season, Benfica played Liverpool again and were again knocked out. I developed respect and fear for The Reds. I don't want to be unfair to the other players, but the ones I feared the most and considered the most charismatic were Ian Rush – the elegant striker – and Bruce Grobbelaar – a funny goalkeeper.

Another defeat I found tough was a game in which Benfica were crushed by arch rivals Sporting in December 1986. As usual, I was listening to the match live on the radio and it seemed so surreal. When Sporting scored the fifth goal to take a 5-1 lead, I begged my mum to turn off the radio. The final result was 7-1, and I couldn't believe a score like that had happened. I didn't cry that day, but months later I remember tears falling from my face after a home defeat versus a team called Marítimo. It's weird when I look back now and remember my behaviour and emotional reactions to defeats; the majority of children my age (seven or eight years old) probably wouldn't react the same way, but for me I really felt the pain in my soul. I was already a competitive person and had a real desire to win, and my will was embodied in the Benfica team. The first time I went to the Stadium of Light was in January 1988 to see Benfica versus Belenenses. I was with my father, who likes football, but he's not passionate about it. Our seats were right at the top and when I saw the whole stadium for the first time,

and its beautiful green pitch, I thought it was magnificent, like I was seeing a perfect piece of art. Benfica won 2-0 and I was captivated by every part of a live football match.

I was lucky to grow up in an era when Portuguese football was going through an excellent period in the 1980s. Our national team qualified for two major tournaments, Euro '84 and World Cup '86. Portugal did very well in Europe, only losing to the host country, France, in the semis after an epic match that was decided during extra time. The Mexico '86 tournament was the first World Cup I watched (I was two years old during the 1982 World Cup and I don't remember any of it). My greatest memories were, of course, Diego Maradona's performances and the way he led Argentina to victory. Portugal lost to Morocco 1-3 and left the tournament on a low note. In club terms, FC Porto had a golden period, winning the European Cup in 1987 against Bayern Munich in a match that I thoroughly enjoyed watching. It was a pleasure to see Rabah Madjer's famous goal off the back heel. I also got up in the middle of the night to watch FC Porto play and win the 1987 Intercontinental Cup match against Peñarol from Uruguay on a snowy pitch. Benfica also clinched two European Cup finals in 1988 and 1990, losing both. My passion for football was confirmed in those years, in such a way that it would never disappear.

I have such great memories of completing my football sticker albums back then. My grandmother, Joana, told me that I was given my first sticker album in around 1982 and after that I became obsessive about collecting them. When the album was from a major tournament I enjoyed it even more because I could collect stickers of great players from all over the world, from Brazil to Cameroon, never forgetting the ever-present South Korea. When I turned 18,

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before the France '98 World Cup, I lost my motivation and that was the first one I didn't finish, but I started collecting again with my son for the Russia 2018 World Cup collection and I really enjoyed it. Some years ago, I bought a set of all the sticker albums from the Euros and World Cups between 1970 and 2006 and I consider this to be one of my most precious possessions.

During my teenage years, I think my all-time favourite football player, who became my idol, was Alan Shearer, an English striker who dominated the Premier League top scorer charts in the mid-90s and was the Euro '96 top scorer. I wanted to be like him because he was a centre-forward – the position I liked to play the most – and I identified with the way he played. He was intelligent and had the ability to understand where to position himself, predicting the way the play would develop. His tremendous finishing skills made him so effective, and when fit he would score amazing goals and he had a fantastic goal-per-game ratio. He was also a special player because of his strong principles during his career. He declined proposals from better teams to stay at his childhood club – Newcastle United. However, his peak was at Blackburn Rovers where he won the Premier League title in the 1994/95 season. He doesn't have many titles on his CV, but individually he broke many records with his consistent performances throughout his entire career.

As well as watching football, I also liked to play it. I usually played as a forward and had the job of getting in to the best position I could to score goals. I remember in elementary school I was considered to be one of the best players in my class. In 1988 my mother enrolled me in a small club in the city where I lived, Estrela da Amadora.

The team had won the championship in my age category the previous season. The first training sessions went really well and I excelled, scoring many goals. However, the coach criticised me, saying I didn't run as much as the others. It was true, but I was trying to stay in the right place so I could score when I got the chance – and I scored a lot of goals, guessing the play and positioning myself in the right spot. I was a bit demoralised, lost confidence and, because I was only young, I started asking to play as a right-winger in the training sessions, like my favourite player at the time – a Benfica player called Pacheco, who was actually a left-winger but as I was not a leftie I had to play on the right wing. I was only nine years old and my natural position was as a central forward, so it didn't really work for me. It would have been very helpful to have had an adult on my side, who could have given me advice and guidance. But I can't use that as an excuse, many young people have had the strength to succeed playing in far more difficult circumstances than me.

I never tried again, probably because of instability in my family (my parents were about to divorce) or because I was constantly being told by my mother that studies should be my only priority. I remember when I was 17 years old I entered a five-a-side tournament and she told me that I shouldn't play because I could 'break a leg' and wouldn't be able to go to college. Coincidence or not, I ended up twisting my left foot in one of the matches, but it was nothing serious so I managed to get into college later that year, in 1997. Two years later, I managed to win a soccer championship, also five-a-side but this time indoor, with my class team – I scored a few goals and got a medal for it. I have good memories of great wins and performances in

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games with colleagues and friends. I think I had the talent and mentality to be a professional football player, and I will always be a bit frustrated that I never made it and I didn't really fight for it. I will not pressure my son to be a football player, but, I can't lie, I'd be really happy if he built a career in the beautiful game.