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The New Football Coach

Chapter 1

Yvette Pesky's Challenge

When I saw her coming, I nearly did a runner. I was not expecting THAT, even though my cousin Marie had warned me: “You’ll see, Jeremy: Miss Charlotte is very... different.”

Let’s just say I had not expected her to be *that* different. Marie had not mentioned that Miss Charlotte was tall and as thin as an asparagus, that she was everything but a spring chicken and that she wore weird clothes and a huge hat, a bit like a witch’s hat but with a round top instead of a pointy one.

I have nothing against being original. The problem was that Miss Charlotte had not been

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invited to a fancy-dress party. She had come to rescue us. To save our skins. That's how I saw it at least.

Her mission was straightforward: to train the players of the Black Duck Brook Football Club. *My* club. And we simply *had* to beat the team from Blueberry Bay in the last match of the season. And if I say we *had* to, I am not exaggerating. And THAT is of course the problem...

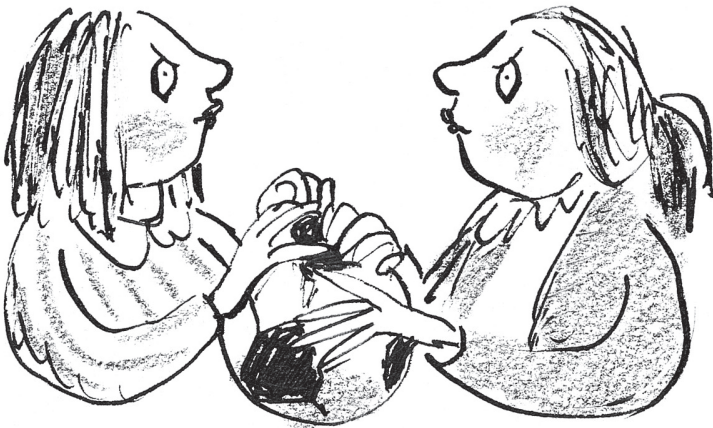
Our headmistress, Paulette Pesky, is the twin sister of Yvette Pesky, the headmistress of the Blueberry Bay school. The two headmistresses have been bickering since they were in nursery school – or as good as – and they still argue over everything. This time they both want their school to be named after the famous international football star Tony Brilliant. Tony Brilliant lives in England now, but he was born in between Black Duck Brook and Blueberry Bay.

We, the pupils, could not care less. Renaming the school will not change our lives in the least. Still, we are in a real fix!

CHAPTER I

A few weeks ago, Yvette Pesky challenged her sister and our headmistress Paulette: the school that would win the last match of the season could call itself the Tony Brilliant School. Ever since then, every day at half-eight, Paulette Pesky hollers down the PA system: “Victory will be ours! We must win!” When I hear that, I feel my stomach tying itself into knots.

Our opponents have found a fearsome coach: Reginald Robust, Yvette Pesky’s husband, an ex-Army colonel, super-strict, mega-disciplined



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and ever so determined. He will do anything to win.

On hearing the news, our coach, Ed Coward, handed in his notice. And no one is willing to replace him. Everyone is too scared to take on Reginald Robust!

The day our coach dropped us like a hot brick, I rang my cousin Marie. I needed to speak to someone I could trust. As she had done on previous occasions, Marie talked about a certain Miss Charlotte, who has changed her life. That's when we came up with a plan.

Marie rang Paulette Pesky pretending to be a headmistress who could recommend her a football coach. My cousin is a great actress. She sang Miss Charlotte's praises so much that PP – that is what we call our headmistress – hired her without even meeting her!

All we had to do now was to track down that supposedly wonderful Miss Charlotte. One little problem, though: she does not have an address! Marie suggested leaving a message on the Grapevine website. And it worked! Although

CHAPTER 1

I don't really understand how. The message sounded like code to me. I only remember it had something to do with a certain Gertrude.

But none of that matters now. What is important is that we must do well in the last match of the season. If we don't, it will be so embarrassing. If we get thrashed, hundreds of spectators will laugh at us. And not just the supporters of the other team! My neighbours, my parents, my mates and all the girls in the school will see us being utterly defeated. And that is not the worst! The worst is that my dad will tell me that he is disappointed, and he'll go on about it for weeks, if not years. And that really would be too embarrassing.

I hate football for a million good reasons. Firstly, because I am rubbish at it. Proper rubbish. As in no good, hopeless, useless – a complete disaster. If I had the choice, I would play chess, not football. What I am good at is strategy. I am really good at coming up with tactics and predicting how the opponent will attack, and then outsmarting them. Unfortunately for me, my dad is mad about football and owns a shop

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called Sports Plus. He was the one who forced Ed Coward to take me on his team.

It's my dad's fault that I am bombarded with insults from Fred Ferocio, the team's top scorer and a right pain in the neck. What he is best at? Shouting at the top of his voice and in front of all the girls: "Jeremy Catastrophe!"

Yesterday, when Fred saw Miss Charlotte enter the gym, he did not for a second think that she could possibly be our new coach. Nor did the others. My teammates kept on asking me questions about that mysterious Miss Charlotte, and they were all anxious to meet her. Had she played in a top league? Had she coached a famous team?

I did not know what to say. My cousin was convinced that her old teacher was the best person on the planet for the job, but she had not explained why. I was about to make up some story when this weird lady stood still in front of us. That beanstalk of a woman with her bizarre headgear, could *she* be our new coach? My stomach tied itself into one huge knot.

CHAPTER I

She stopped and just smiled, calmly looking at us with her blue, cheerful eyes. After a few seconds in which we all stood there gawping, Priti, the fastest player in the team and also the most polite, asked her: “Can we help you?” The celery stick answered: “Oh no, I have come to help *you!*” After that, she did a funny pirouette followed by a curtsy, like they do in films when they greet a king or a queen. Then she declared: “I am Miss Charlotte, your new football coach!”

Ten pairs of eyes turned to me, shooting daggers. I had the impression that the team would have preferred to have our headmistress, the dreaded PP herself, have a go at coaching our team. I was sure they were about to chop me into little pieces when Miss Charlotte announced: “Today we will be learning how to lose.”

That is literally what she said! My teammates were so shocked that they forgot all about smashing me to a pulp.

They were stunned, and all they could do was listen to what she had to say.



Chapter 2

Smalalamiam, Anyone?

She was not joking. Miss Charlotte's objective for our first training session was that we had to learn how to lose! But first she had to convince Fred Ferocio to join us on the pitch.

“When you play football,” she explained, “there is usually one team that wins and another one that loses. So it is very important to learn how to lose. Victory is great, but defeat could be even better!”

Fred interrupted her. “OK, enough of playing the clown! YOU may have learnt how to lose, but WE know how to play and we are here to WIN. If you are in any doubt, go and talk to PP.”

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We all agreed with Fred. There was a brief silence. As Laurence, the team's joker, always says: you could hear an ant pant.

"Do you know how to play?" asked Miss Charlotte, not sounding convinced. "Show me, then!"

We all leapt to our feet. Except for Fred.

"On one condition," he said, trying to strike a deal. "First show us that *you* know how to play. Let's just say that you don't look like you can."

Many of my team-mates burst out laughing. But Miss Charlotte paid no attention. "Yay!" she shouted, clapping in her hands like an excited child.

We left the gym to walk onto the pitch. Only now did I notice that our new coach was carrying a bag made of goodness knows what kind of leather. And from it she took a football. It looked like an ordinary football. I sighed with relief. And then Miss Charlotte said: "Let me introduce you to... Anatole!"

At that point we all felt like skedaddling. Except that we did not have the time, because

CHAPTER 2

Miss Charlotte had started to play with Anatole. She played like a pro and put on quite a show! She let the ball roll from one shoulder to the other and juggled it using her head, her knees, her back and even her backside... Fred's eyes were like saucers.

“Where did you learn to do that?” asked Laurence when Miss Charlotte had stopped, her eyes shining and not the least bit out of breath.

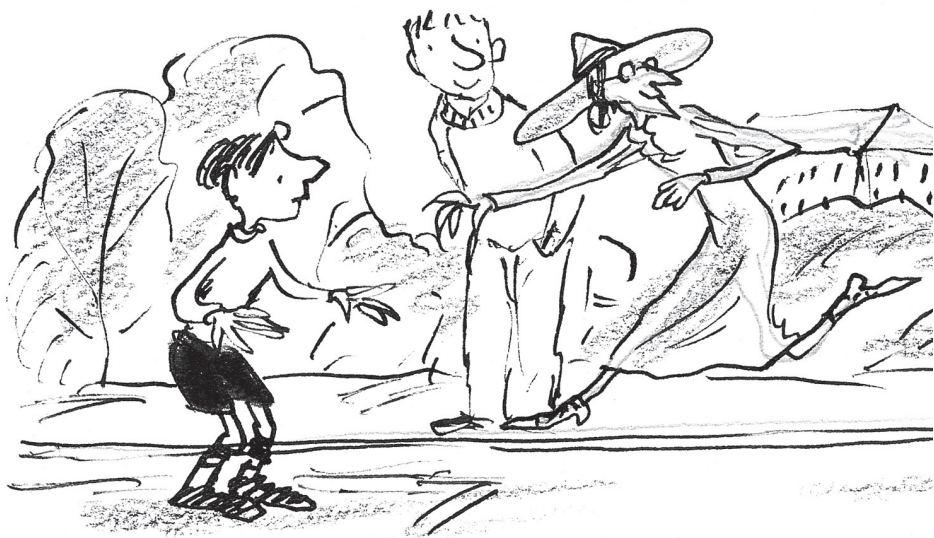


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“Oh well, Anatole and I go back a long time...”

Ten minutes after we started our game, our new coach scored her third goal. Not only did she play well, it was obvious how much fun she was having. It was as if in the whole wide world there were nothing better than to run after a black-and-white ball.

Normally coaches *watch* their teams. They are there to observe, to criticize, to shout orders, to offer advice... and to give players who make mistakes an earful. I know, because I have had plenty!



CHAPTER 2

Miss Charlotte was different. For starters, when we formed two teams, she insisted on playing herself. Her team won, making Fred furious. He had just suffered a rare defeat, while I found myself on the winning side, which was unheard of!

Miss Charlotte's enthusiasm had the effect of a magic potion on us. I nearly forgot how much I hated the game. She laughed and joked and encouraged us. Every player surpassed him- or herself. The second match was won by Fred's team. He had never played better.



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At the end of our training session, Miss Charlotte put Anatole carefully back in her bag, caressing the ball softly. As if it were alive!

“Now let’s decide who was the man or woman of the match,” our new coach proposed. “Who should get that honour, you think?”

Everyone turned their eyes to Fred, who was already putting on a triumphant smile. No need to say he had scored the most goals.

“Him? No, no. I don’t see why. I want to know who *lost* the best,” Miss Charlotte said.

No one said a word. We were wondering if our coach did it on purpose to provoke us, or if she was a bit off her rocker.

“Just have a think about it. Tomorrow I will treat those who come up with the best answer to some *smalalamiam*.”

And whoosh! Off she went.

A thousand questions were milling around in my head. What was *smalalamiam*? What does it mean to “lose the best”? And could anyone actually *prefer* to lose?

CHAPTER 2

Normally, after a training, all the players are in a hurry to go home. They are tired and hungry, and they have tons of homework to be getting on with, mates to see and TV series to watch. This time, it was different. We stayed behind to see Miss Charlotte walk off with her funny leather bag in which she kept Anatole.

That is when I found myself thinking that perhaps Anatole was a magic football. That with any other ball Miss Charlotte would have been useless. Like me! It was also when I discovered that I was looking forward to our next training session. And that, to be honest, was the most amazing thing of all.



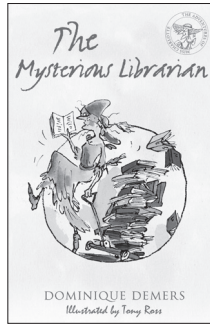
IF YOU LIKED THIS STORY, WHY DON'T YOU TRY
ANOTHER OF MISS CHARLOTTE'S ADVENTURES?



"She's bonkers!"

Miss Charlotte, the new teacher, is not like the others: she wears a large hat and a crumpled dress that make her look like a scarecrow, and she talks to a rock. The children think she is crazy at first, but soon realize she makes school more fun, getting them to measure the room with cooked spaghetti in maths class, telling fascinating stories about a gorilla and even taking the pupils on at football.

The first book in Dominique Demers's popular series, *The New Teacher* - brilliantly illustrated by Tony Ross - is an entertaining, imaginative and inspiring book that will make you wish you had a teacher just like Miss Charlotte.



"That beanpole of a woman!"

When the mysterious and eccentric Miss Charlotte arrives in the village of Saint-Anatole to take over the tiny library, the locals are surprised to find out that she does things differently. Wearing a long blue dress and a giant hat, she takes her books out for a walk in a wheelbarrow and shows the children that reading can be fun and useful. Sometimes she is so caught up in the magic of the stories she shares with her audience that she forgets all sense of reality - so much so that one day she loses consciousness and the children must find a way to bring her back.

The second in Dominique Demers's popular series, *The Mysterious Librarian*, brilliantly illustrated by Tony Ross, is a wonderful story about the magical and inspiring power of books.

