

Dumpling of the Rovers

Picture by Joe Smith (age 10), words by Sarah McIntyre

What are you saying, you haven't heard of Dumpling the unicorn? The most famous footballer in the world? What? How can this be? Then you obviously know *nothing* about football; let me tell you the story.

People say football is 'pure magic' but it was not always so. In fact, in the early days, it was quite boring. This is because Fleetwood Rovers were so much better than all the other teams that no one could ever score a single goal against them. Which is great if you were playing for Fleetwood Rovers, and if you were a striker shooting all the goals. The strikers were so good that during their matches, the ball never even got past the half-way line, and their goalkeeper, Lizzie Heffalump, made a big joke of it, stretching out on a deck chair between the goalposts, drinking lemonade in big glasses with fruit and little umbrellas stuck in it. The Rovers joked that they didn't even need defenders; in fact, they argued, a horse could play defender and they'd still win.

So they brought in a horse, a small, dull-looking grey horse, with a strange pointy warty thing on its forehead.

'I'm actually a unicorn,' said the horse (or possibly a unicorn, if you believe in such things), whose name was Dumpling. But no one believed a horse could talk, so no one heard what Dumpling said. Everyone in the stadium laughed each time he took his place at the end of the field and stood, waiting for the ball that never came anywhere near him. He stood through rainy matches. He endured matches so bitterly cold that he had to run around in little circles to keep warm, which made the crowd laugh and jeer at him. In his heart, Dumpling wanted to be the one they cheered for, the one who kicked that ball into the goal.

Even though Rovers' matches were terribly dull, people kept going along to watch them. But there was an explanation for this. What do you think is inside a football? I bet you think it's full of air. That's not strictly true. There's a reason people get so excited about football, even when it's boring: that's because each ball is full of all the magic colours of the world, in a gaseous state. You weren't supposed to know this; back then it was a closely kept secret, known only by referees. They tried to downplay it by looking as colourless as possible and wearing black uniforms so people wouldn't guess that there were little traces of colourful magic leaking out of the ball.

One day one of Rovers' strikers was sick. And then another got a red card for cruelly taunting Blackpool Wanderers' left back. The rest of the Rovers (except Dumpling) just laughed, they knew they could win any match in their sleep. They'd even stopped going to practice, there was just no need. Or so they thought. While one of the strikers was doing a little pirouette with the ball, to show off to the crowd, she accidentally tipped it to the opposition. The player from Blackpool Wanderers was so surprised that she panicked and booted the ball right down the field. Dumpling saw it coming.

'THIS IS MY MOMENT!' he thought. Everyone in the crowd held their breath. The ball came down and Dumpling gave it the perfect header. But remember how Dumpling claimed to be a unicorn? Whatever he was, his warty-thing perfectly skewered the ball and there it stuck. The other players turned around and groaned. WHAT was that silly horse playing at??

But Dumpling's horn had popped the ball and released all the colourful magic trapped inside. It poured down over Dumpling's face and over his body. Everyone gasped as what had been a drab, grey, warty horse was now glowing with every colour of the rainbow. They gasped as Dumpling magically rose up in the air and soared over the stadium, his colours shimmering and vivid. Little drops of chocolate magically rained down on the crowd, and when they worked out they were chocolate (not poo), they cheered, and tried to catch them.

Wanderer's goalkeeper, Daisy Wafer, merely gaped as Dumpling floated down into her goal, and he gently touched the skewered ball over the line.

'I SCORED!' he whinnied, and this time everyone understood him. The referee ran up, looking pale.

'That was a foul! You can't carry the ball! ... HAND BALL!' she shouted. Dumpling looked on calmly, for he knew he had no hands. The referee hung her head in shame; she knew he was right. The stadium went wild.

Fleetwood Rovers never won a single match after that. Their lack of practice had really started to show, and unicorn went to play for Blackpool Wanderers, who were much kinder to him. Everyone bought season tickets to Wanderers' matches so they could see Dumpling doing an amazing job defending. Their favourite part was his halftime act, when he soared over the crowd, wearing his special pink cape, dazzling them with his bright colours and dispensing chocolate. What more could anyone want in a football match?

And that is why Dumpling the rainbow unicorn is now the most famous football player the world has ever known. I'm glad I've set you right on this; now you can go and impress all your friends.