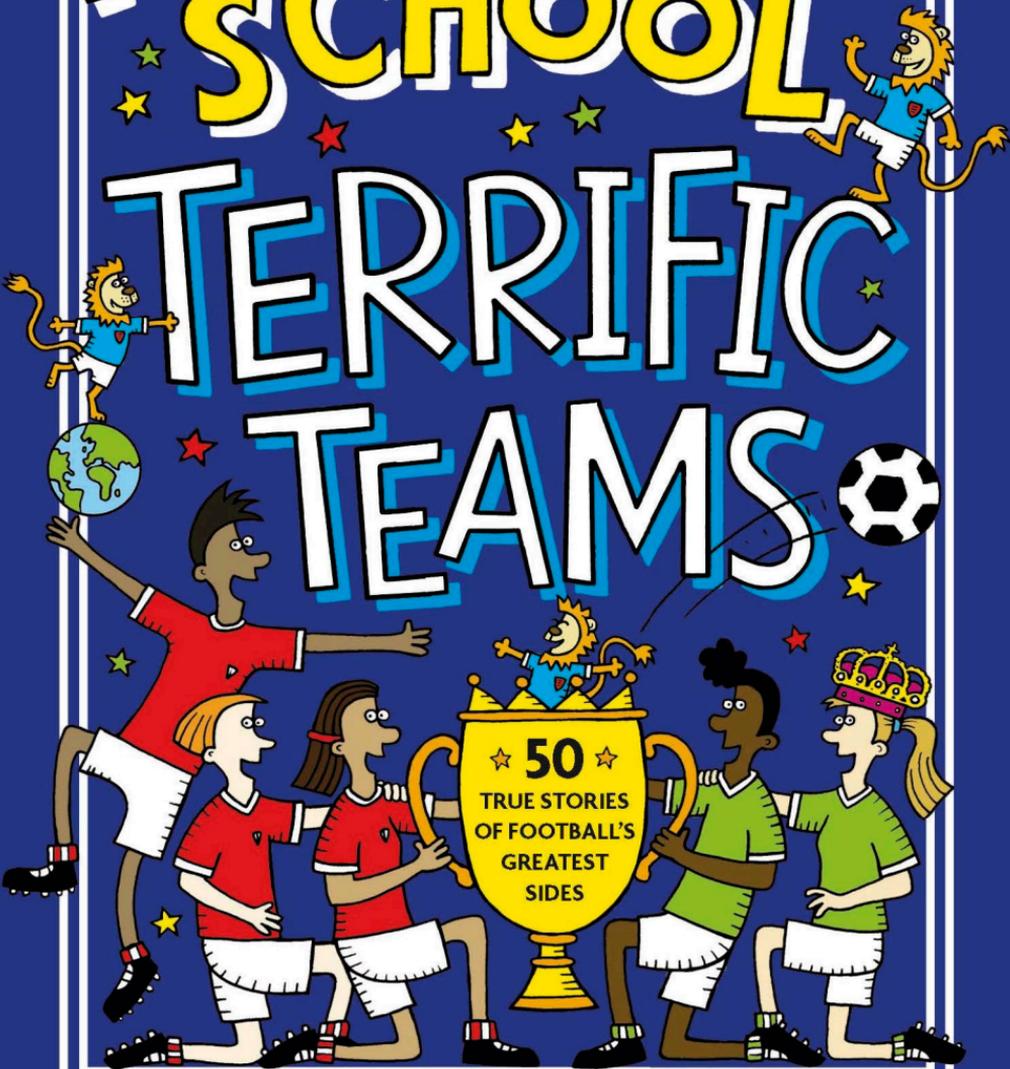


FOOTBALL
SCHOOL

TERRIFIC
TEAMS



ALEX BELLOS



BEN LYTTLETON



Football School

Name:

Class:

Coaches:



Kickito Ergo Sum

To infinity! – A.B.
To ABBC, with love – B.L.
For David & Veronica – S.G.

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www.walker.co.uk
www.footballschool.co

FOOTBALL SCHOOL TERRIFIC TEAMS



ALEX BELLOS & BEN LYTTLETON

Illustrated by Spike Gerrell

Welcome to Football School Terrific Teams.

We're terrifically pleased to meet you! I'm Alex.

And I'm Ben. Welcome to the team!

Let's huddle in as we explain our tactics.

In this book, you will be reading about 50 fabulous football sides, including amateur clubs, Premier League giants and World Cup winners.

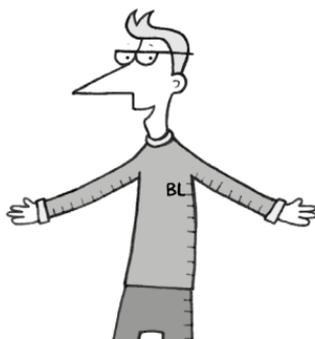
We've chosen men's and women's teams who have written football history ...

... with towering tallies of tremendous trophies.

And teams whose innovations have changed the game we love.

We have inspiring stories of underdogs who achieved the impossible.

And stories of real dogs and ghost dogs too. Have we got tails for you!



You will recognize some of the biggest names in club football, like Manchester United, Arsenal and Real Madrid.

And some of the best national sides, like Brazil, Germany and France.

We have also chosen lesser-known, but no less extraordinary, line-ups from history, and from across the world.

Join us as we travel from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, from Suffolk to South Africa, and from Orkney to Australia.

We're lucky to have illustrator Spike on our team. He's our MVP (Most Valuable Painter).

He has drawn hilarious images inspired by the crests of each team.

The crest, or badge, is the proudest symbol of what a club or national side stands for. It's what you kiss when you score!

You don't need to kiss this book. Only Alex's mum does that!

Come on, team, let's be serious! Together we can do this.

Remember, there is no I in TEAM.

But there is an oo in Football School!

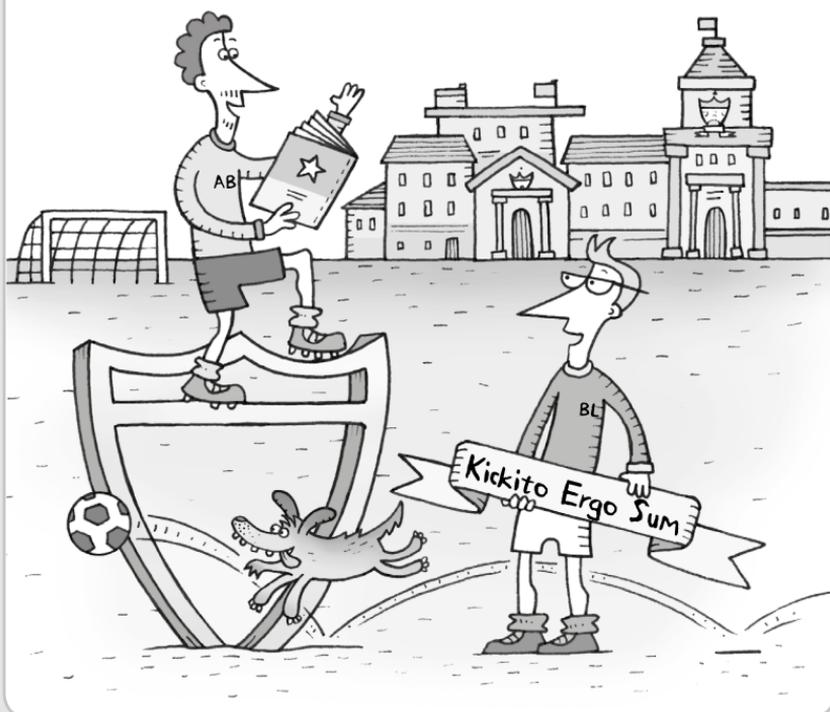


FOOTBALL SCHOOL



Best of the crest:

The Football School motto is a play on words, in which the English word “kick” is placed in the Latin phrase *cogito ergo sum*, or “I think therefore I am”, to mean “I kick, therefore I am”.



Mascot:

Ben's dog,
Buddy



Home kit:

Pencil,
paper,
computer



Stadium:

Rotates
between
bookshops

The team that plays it by the book!

Before we start, we want to introduce you to the most terrific team in the world: Football School! This team features Alex and Ben, but also illustrator Spike, editor Daisy, assistant Maryam, designer Laurelie and, last but not least, you, the reader!

Alex and Ben write their books very much like they play football together. Alex kicks the ball to Ben, who kicks it back to Alex, who kicks it back to Ben, and so on. With books, Alex and Ben are always bouncing ideas back and forth. It is always easier – and more fun! – to get inspiration when you are doing it with a friend.

Once we agree on a subject, we research and write. Alex writes something. Ben writes something. We pass the stories between each other for feedback and comments. There is so much one-two-ing that when the stories are finished you can't tell which started as an Alex story or a Ben story. They have all become Football School stories!

Once the text is done, we show it to Spike. He is an artist of the ball, blessed with amazing technique, sublime creative skills and an enviably large bag of coloured pens. Spike can place a ball in a net with pinpoint accuracy – especially if he is drawing it!

The full list of people involved in making this book a success is a long one, including printers, lorry drivers, salespeople, booksellers – and, of course, readers. It may say Alex and Ben on the cover, but this book is a team effort. We are nothing without our terrific team!



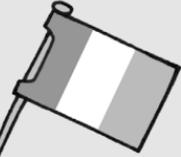
HOME BOYS

Alex and Ben used to live five minutes away from each other. When Ben recently moved house, he made sure his new house was still near to Alex. Now that's a close friendship!

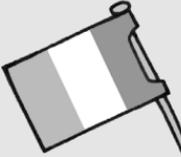
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AC MILAN

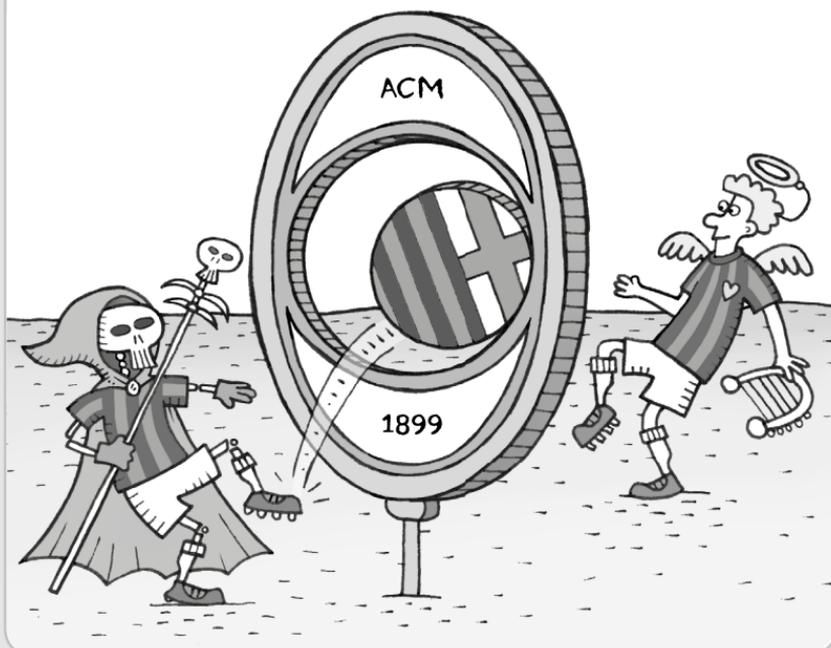


Nickname: *I Rossoneri* (The Red and Blacks)



Best of the crest:

The central circle is divided into two. On the left: red and black stripes. The red represents the players' passion and the black their opponents' fear. On the right: the city of Milan flag, a red cross on white.



Mascot:

Milanello the red devil



Home kit:

Red and black striped shirt, white shorts, white socks



Stadium:

San Siro, Milan, cap. 80,000

European giants with an important legacy

AC Milan are Italy's most successful team in European football. They have won the Champions League – or its predecessor, the European Cup – seven times. Only one team, Real Madrid, has won it more. But the influence of the Rossoneri extends far beyond their trophy cabinet. You red (and black) it here first!

When we see players today pressing opponents close to their own goal, defenders starting high up the pitch and using offside traps, this is all down to the influence of AC Milan. Or more precisely, to one man: Arrigo Sacchi. A tactically brilliant coach, he led AC Milan to successive European Cups in 1989 (which included a 6–1 win over Real Madrid) and 1990.

Sacchi was initially mocked when he was appointed, because he had never played the game professionally, unlike most managers at that time. “I never realized that to be a jockey you had to be a horse first,” he replied. Sacchi developed his pioneering tactics after years watching and learning about football, showing that brilliant coaches need not have been top players. “He completely changed how we think about football,” said Jürgen Klopp, another great coach who was not a great footballer.

Milan's last European title came in 2007. These days, they are back on the hunt for the top trophies again, inspired by the goals of Franck Kessié and Zlatan Ibrahimović. The Red and Blacks are red and back!



GIGI IN A HURRY

Goalkeeper Gigi Donnarumma was sixteen when he first played for AC Milan in 2015 and seventeen on his Italy debut. He captained AC Milan for the first time aged twenty-one, playing his two-hundredth game.



AL AHLY

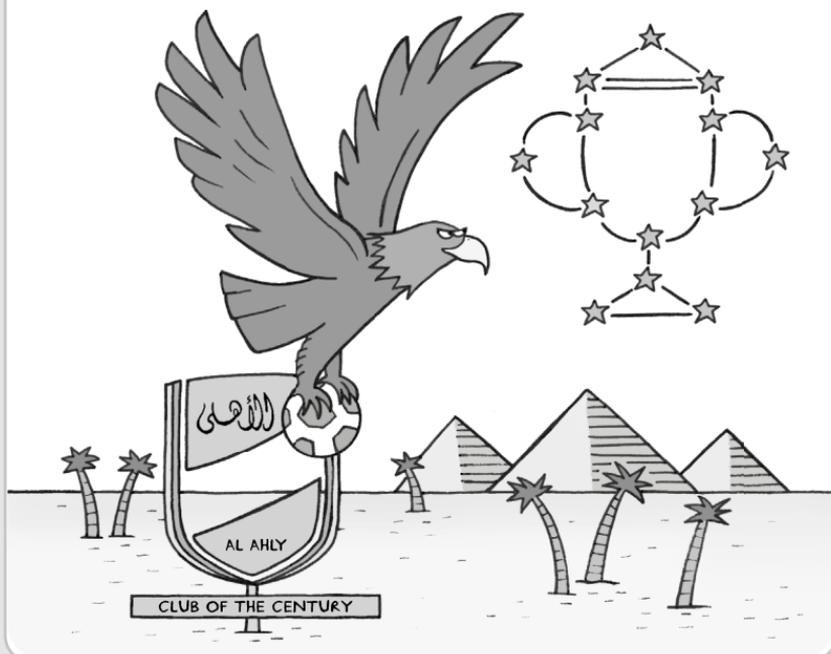


Nickname: The Red Devils



Best of the crest:

The eagle has been a symbol of Egypt since the time of the pyramids. The thirteen stars represent nine African Champions League titles, and 40 Egyptian league titles (one star for every ten league titles).



Legend:



Mahmoud El Khatib, striker, won 10 league titles



Home kit:

Red shirt, white shorts, red socks



Stadium:

Al Salam, Cairo, cap. 30,000

Top Egyptian club overcomes tragedy to win African title

When it comes to trophies, Egyptian side Al Ahly are arguably the most successful in the world, having notched up more league titles, cup titles and continental titles than any other major club. Few clubs, however, have experienced tragedy on the scale that they have. In 2012, rival fans attacked Al Ahly fans during an Egyptian league game, causing a riot that left 72 Al Ahly fans dead. It was the greatest disaster in Egyptian football history. Yet it led to the most improbable – and treasured – of all Al Ahly's victories.

Al Ahly are based in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, and are the oldest football club in the country. They have dominated the national league since it began in 1948: there have been 61 seasons so far, and Al Ahly have won 42 of them!

In February 2012, Al Ahly travelled to play Al Masry, a team from Port Said, in a league game. After the match, Al Masry fans ran onto the pitch and attacked Al Ahly players and the visiting fans with bottles, stones and fireworks. It is thought that the violence had little to do with football rivalry, but instead was orchestrated by the Egyptian government as revenge for the involvement of Al Ahly fans in anti-government protests the year before. During the riot, the teams' players fled to the changing room. Fans were crushed in a stampede as they tried to escape the stadium. One fan died in the arms of Al Ahly captain Mohamed Aboutrika.



NATIONAL HEROES

Al Ahly, which means “The National” in Arabic, had their best season in 2005, winning the Egyptian league, Cup, Super Cup, and African Champions League in an unbeaten 46-game run. Unstoppable!

As a result of the tragedy, Egyptian league matches were cancelled. But Al Ahly were also playing in the African Champions League, and they vowed to carry on in the competition. With the trauma and sadness of the tragedy still so fresh, no one expected Al Ahly to be at their best; but the team were desperate to pay tribute to those who had lost their lives.

In the second round, they travelled to Mali and lost 1–0 to Stade Malien. Here again they faced violent scenes, although this time away from the pitch. Straight after the game, a military coup took place – this is when the army seizes power from the government – and there was vicious fighting in the streets. The players were stuck in their hotel for a week as they waited for the chance to get to an airport safely to fly home.

In the second leg against Stade Malien, at home in Cairo, Al Ahly quickly went behind. At half-time, Aboutrika came on. He scored twice to equalize, and then, with two minutes left to play, he volleyed home a glorious winner to send Al Ahly through. The captain had scored a second-half hat-trick!

But the club's challenges were far from over. Al Ahly's coach quit, and Aboutrika was banned for refusing to play in a match where he didn't feel safe. Yet still Al Ahly kept winning.

In the semi-final, they beat Nigeria's Sunshine Stars 1–0 to reach the final, against Tunisian champions Espérance. The first leg, played in Egypt, finished 1–1. Al Ahly won the second leg 2–1. It was nine months after the Port Said tragedy and the grief was still raw.



FINAL	
2012	
AL AHLY	2 (3)
ESPÉRANCE	1 (2)



Players celebrated wearing shirts with the number 72 on the front, referring to the number of fans who died.

Aboutrika lifted the trophy with a mixture of joy, sadness and pride: joy at their victory, sadness at the lives so tragically lost and immense pride that his team had fulfilled their pledge to honour those lives against all odds.

MOST SUCCESSFUL TEAMS IN THE AFRICAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

TEAM	COUNTRY	TITLES	MOST RECENT TITLE
Al Ahly	Egypt	9	2020
Zamalek	Egypt	5	2002
TP Mazembe	DR Congo	5	2015
Espérance ST	Tunisia	4	2019
Haşia FC	Guinea	3	1977
Raja CA	Morocco	3	1999
Canon Yaoundé	Cameroon	3	1980





ALCOYANO



Nickname: Deportivo



Best of the crest:

The bat is a traditional symbol of the Valencian region in Spain, where the town of Alcoy is located. Bats are meant to bring good luck because one is said to have landed on the flag of James I before he conquered Valencia in 1238.



Mascot:

TiVo
the bat



Home kit:

Blue
and white
striped shirt,
blue shorts,
blue socks



Stadium:

El Collao,
Alcoy,
cap. 5,000

Spirited underdogs who never give up

Alcoyano are a semi-professional team from the east of Spain, and are not used to winning big games. In 2021 they caused one of the biggest shocks in Spanish football history when they knocked Real Madrid out of the Spanish Cup. The victory fulfilled the words of an old legend.

There is a well-known phrase used in Spain that goes: *más moral que el Alcoyano*. It translates as “more spirit than Alcoyano” and is used to describe those who have a confidence in winning even if they clearly have no hope. People think it dates back to the 1940s, the last time Alcoyano played in the Spanish first division. That team never gave up!



One story has them begging the referee for a few more minutes at the end of a match against Espanyol because they thought they could win – even though they were 7–1 down at the time. Another story claims that when they were losing 13–0, they still felt they could win. That’s the Alcoyano spirit!

In 2021, in the Spanish Cup third round, Alcoyano faced Real Madrid, a team packed with international superstars, which cost billions to put together. Alcoyano came from behind to win 2–1. Alcoyano coach Vicente Parras was so proud of his players. “You want to know what *más moral que el Alcoyano* is?” he said after the game. “It’s this.”



PANDEMIC PAIN

When Alcoyano beat Real Madrid, the town was struggling with the highest coronavirus infection rate in Spain. This was the positive result everyone needed!

AMERICAN SAMOA

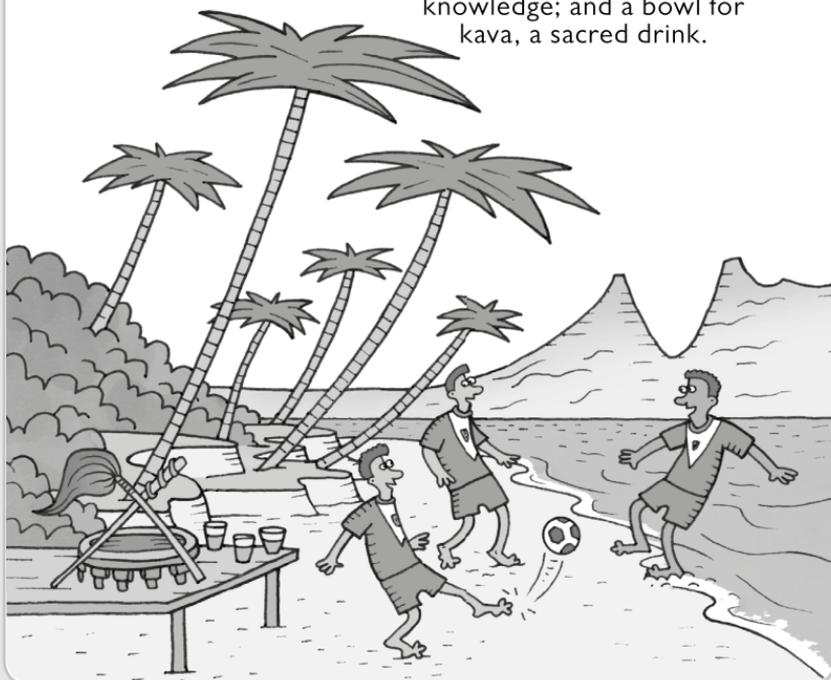


Nickname: The Boys from the Territory



Best of the crest:

The crest features the three objects on the table, each of which represents an aspect of Samoan culture: a staff used by the islands' chiefs; the mop-like fue, a symbol of knowledge; and a bowl for kava, a sacred drink.



World Cup record:

Never qualified



Home kit:

Blue and white shirt, blue shorts, blue socks



Stadium:

Pago Park, Pago Pago, cap. 2,000

Dignified in defeat, islanders are the pride of the Pacific

Not all terrific teams win trophies – or even matches. Sometimes losing with your head held high makes a team terrific. And when it comes to terrific losses, no one has lost more terrifically than American Samoa.

This tiny nation is made up of six volcanic islands in the southern Pacific Ocean, and is not to be confused with Samoa, another group of islands about 50 miles away. Samoa is an independent nation, but American Samoa is governed by the US. The two Samoas have many cultural links, but they have many differences too, such as separate currencies and they drive on different sides of the road.

American Samoa's national football team became known across the world when they lost their first ever World Cup qualifier by a world-record margin, and then responded with astonishing dignity. The grim score in their historic defeat against Australia was 31–0!

American Samoa were the lowest-placed team in the FIFA rankings when the match was played in 2001. The odds were stacked against them before kick-off. FIFA had ordered that all players must have American passports to travel to the game in Australia, which took place in a stadium near Brisbane. Nineteen players only had Samoan passports, so were not able to play. Many players from the Under-20 team were ruled out because school exams were taking place at the same time.



YOU'RE WELCOME!

The population of American Samoa is 55,000. The area produces more NFL players and US servicemen, per head, than any other US territory.

The American Samoa coach cobbled together a group that included three fifteen-year-olds and had an average age of eighteen. Goalkeeper Nicky Salapu was the only first-team player able to make the game – and it was just as well he did!

They were up against an experienced Australia team that included several players from the Premier League. Salapu made a series of impressive saves to keep it goalless after ten minutes. After Con Boutsianis opened the scoring, the deluge began; by half-time it was 16–0; another fifteen goals followed in the second half. Australia striker Archie Thompson ended up scoring a record thirteen goals in the game. American Samoa had only one shot at goal, when they were already 29 goals down. It was saved.



But when the final whistle blew, one team was definitely happiest. They embraced each other and sang with the fans. Can you guess which team it was? American Samoa! They were pleased they had kept the score down, given the players they had, and were grateful to their man-of-the-match, Salapu, who had made over 20 important saves.

But the game haunted him. Fans often reminded him of it and bullies teased his son about the scoreline. Salapu replayed

the fixture on the FIFA video game, playing as American Samoa and his son as Australia. To try to get over the defeat, he froze his son's controller (with his permission!) and did not stop playing until American Samoa were winning 50–0.

The impact of the match was long-lasting: FIFA changed their qualifying system so that weaker teams like American Samoa played against opposition of a similar standard in preliminary rounds, to allow them more competitive matches. It meant American Samoa were able to slowly improve and move up the FIFA rankings.

Ten years later, Salapu finally put the loss behind him, when he was part of the American Samoa team that won their first ever match. After a run of 30 successive defeats, American Samoa beat Tonga 2–1 in a World Cup qualifier. Salapu, the only survivor of the 31–0 loss to play, cried tears of joy. He declared, "I'm going to put the past behind me . . . I'm a free man!" After a long, long wait, American Samoa had won at last.



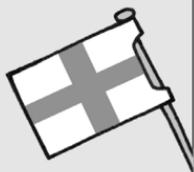
TERRIFIC TROUNCINGS

These famous games were won by huge margins:

SCORE	COMPETITION	COMMENTS
Arbroath 36 Bon Accord 0	First round of the 1885 Scottish Cup	Largest margin in an honest game of professional football.
AS Adema 149 SO L'Emyrne 0	Madagascan league 2002	Highest score in professional football, but it was a thrown game, in which all the goals were own goals scored in protest.
Hungary 10 El Salvador 1	Group stage of 1982 World Cup	Largest margin in a World Cup match. Even so, Hungary failed to progress beyond the group stage!
USA 13 Thailand 0	Group stage of 2019 Women's World Cup	Largest margin in a Women's World Cup match. USA won the tournament.



ARSENAL

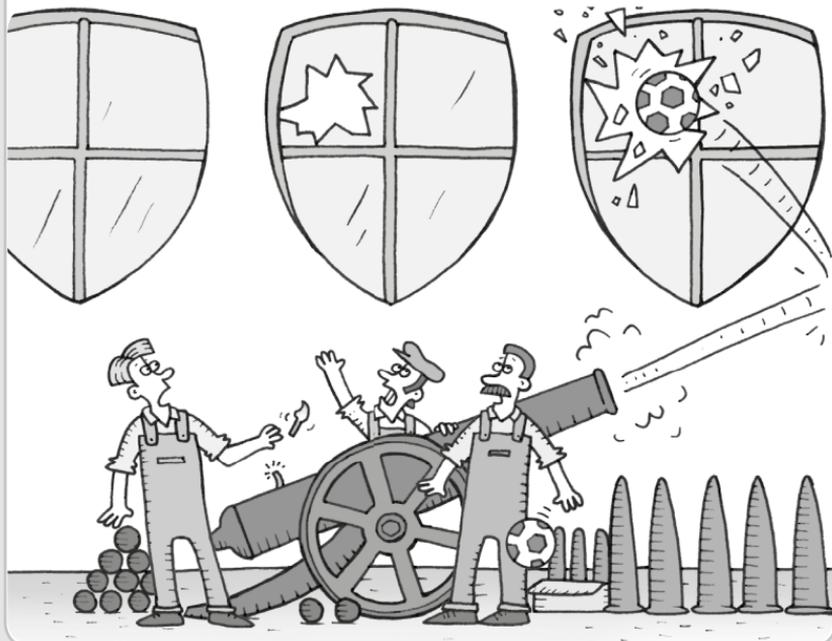


Nickname: The Gunners



Best of the crest:

The cannon reflects the club's name: an arsenal is a place where military weapons are made and stored. The club's founders were employees at Woolwich Arsenal, where weapons were made for the British Army.



Mascot:

Gunnernaut
the dinosaur



Home kit:

Red and
white shirt,
white shorts,
red socks



Stadium:

Emirates,
London,
cap. 60,000

Red, white and invincible!

Arsenal have long been making English football history. The north London club pioneered the introduction of shirt numbers in 1933. The first match ever televised by the BBC was Arsenal v. Arsenal Reserves in 1937. That same decade, they developed a new tactical system called “WM”, which had five attacking players positioned on the points of a “W”, and five defensive players positioned on the points of an “M”. The system revolutionised the game. What Magnificence! Wizardly Masters!

When it comes to performance on the pitch, Arsenal have achieved more than most clubs dream of: they have the longest run of any English team without relegation, having been in the top division since 1919. They have won the FA Cup more times than anyone else. And in 2004, the team did something no men’s team has done in the English top-flight game before or since: they played 38 matches – 19 home and 19 away – without losing a single one. Let’s find out more about the unbeatable team of 2004, who became known to fans as the Invincibles.

The coach at the time was Arsène Wenger, who had won titles in France and Japan before his appointment as Arsenal boss in 1996. When he arrived in London, almost nobody had heard of him, but he quickly won fans over. In his second season, he led the team to victory in the Premier League and FA Cup, and three years later did it again. The double double! But for Wenger this was not good enough. When they won their second league trophy, Arsenal had lost three games. Wenger vowed to win the league again, but in a better way. “I strive for perfection,” he said.



Wenger had a knack for putting together teams. He grew up above a pub in France and used to sit in on the local football team's meetings. He once claimed he had been picking teams since he was ten years old! He had long dreamed of going through a season unbeaten, and told his Arsenal players at the beginning of the 2003–4 season that he thought they were the team that could do it. They did not believe him: after all, no one had done it before. It turned out that Wenger knew his team better than they knew themselves!

Wenger's squad had the technical ability to do it. But they needed other things too, like the physical strength to avoid injury. Wenger had changed players' diets and introduced more stretching in training sessions to help make this happen.

They also needed game intelligence and composure under pressure. Wenger was on the case: he encouraged the team to work things out for themselves. He asked them to find the solutions, rather than telling them exactly what to do in every situation. This had a big impact on the players' development and their sense of responsibility in tough games.



Wenger demanded two more things from his team. The first was speed – not just running fast, but also mental speed, so they could make good decisions in a tight game. Winger Robert Pires described Wenger as a chef, adding players from different nations and backgrounds with their own flavours. “Then you mix them and it makes a magnificent dish!”



Finally, the players must have a fierce desire to win. This was enhanced by the players themselves; they became a close group of friends, who would regularly go out for dinners together and discuss tactics.

There were a few times in the season when the task looked beyond them. In their thirty-second game, against Liverpool, Arsenal were 2–1 down at half-time and struggling. But their sense of purpose and drive to win kicked in, and they scored two goals in a minute. The second, a solo goal, was from star striker Thierry Henry with a run that started inside his own half. They ended up winning 4–2.

Once the title victory was sealed, they faced a last-match challenge against Leicester. They were 1–0 down at half-time, but there was no way this team would break their winning streak now! Henry equalized and it was fitting that the team’s captain, Patrick Vieira, scored the winning goal. The Invincibles had done it! Another first for this historic English club!



WHAT A CRAKA!

When Arsenal beat Chelsea 3–1 in the Premier League in December 2020, their scorers were Alexandre Lacazette, Granit Xhaka and Bukayo Saka. Also known as Laca, Xhaka, Saka!



ARSENAL WOMEN



Nickname: The Gunners



Best of the crest:

For almost a century, the cannon on the Arsenal crest pointed left, until in 2002 the club decided to make it point in the other direction. About turn!



Mascot:

Gunnersaurus
the dinosaur



Home kit:

Red and
white shirt,
white shorts,
red socks



Stadium:

Meadow Park,
Borehamwood,
cap. 4,500

The unstoppable team that conquered Europe

The 2004 Arsenal men's team may have been the Invincibles, but around the same time the women's team were even better: they were the Unstoppables. Arsenal Women went unbeaten in the league for four seasons in a row, from 2004–05 to 2007–08, a run that spanned an astonishing 108 games. Talk about gunning for glory!

The high point of the team's history was the 2006–07 season, when they won all six competitions they entered, ending the league campaign with a 100 per cent winning record:

PLAYED	WON	DRAWN	LOST	FOR	AGAINST	POINTS
22	22	0	0	119	10	66

The most prestigious of these six titles was the 2007 UEFA Women's Cup, the forerunner to the Champions League. No one expected Arsenal to win. It was the first – and, as we write this, only – time that an English side has won Europe's top women's tournament.

The final was against Swedish powerhouse Umeå, who had won the title twice before and counted Brazilian superstar Marta in their line-up. Arsenal, on the other hand, had to do without their star player, Kelly Smith, who had been sent off in the semi-final against Brondby (and then been given an extra ban for swearing and kicking over a chair on her way off the pitch).



SMELLY SOCKS ALERT!

Before Arsenal Women turned semi-professional in 2002, many players earned money by working in Arsenal's laundry department. This team knew how to keep a clean sheet!



But this setback made the team even more determined to prove people wrong. In the final minute of the first leg, defender Alex Scott ran up the wing and let fly from 25 yards. Her shot flew into the top of the net to put the Gunners ahead.

Arsenal's 2007 team was full of leaders. They may have been missing Smith, but they could call upon the captains of England (Faye White), Wales (Jayne Ludlow), Scotland (Julie Fleeting) and Ireland (Ciara Grant). In the second leg, the team all worked extra hard to defend their lead. Somehow, Arsenal kept out everything that was thrown at them. At one point, Umeå took a shot that hit the post, cannoned off the goalkeeper's face and hit the post again. But they held on for a 0–0 draw, winning the tie 1–0 on aggregate. Arsenal were champions of Europe!



This victory was a triumphant conclusion to a journey that had started exactly 20 years before. Arsenal Ladies, as they were originally named, were one of the first women's teams set up by a men's football club. In 1987, Vic Akers, a former footballer who worked on Arsenal's community projects, founded the team. Akers went on to coach Arsenal Ladies for 21 years in addition to his other jobs at Arsenal, which included being the kit-man for the men's first team. (He used to sit next to Arsène Wenger in the dugout during Arsenal games, always wearing shorts, whatever the weather.)

Even though they had the name of a big club, Arsenal Ladies started off as an amateur team, meaning that the players were not paid. Many of them had other full-time jobs. Sometimes training started at nine o'clock in the evening so players could get there on time.

Arsenal Ladies won their first league title in 1992 and more than 30 trophies followed during Akers' years in charge. They are the most successful women's team in English football history, winning nine straight league titles between 2003 and 2012.

Now known as Arsenal Women, the team helped usher in a new era of women's football, which over the last decade and a half has become fully professional. The team are still winning league titles, most recently in 2019, thanks to the goals of Dutch phenomenon Vivianne Miedema, one of the game's biggest stars. These hotshot gunners are still aiming high!



QUEEN KELLY

Kelly Smith played for Arsenal over three different periods. A forward who has been described as England's best ever player – she once scored from the halfway line against Russia in Euro 2009 – she retired in 2017 and is now an ambassador for women's football. Altogether, she helped Arsenal win four league titles and three FA Cups. She also inspired a generation of players, like Arsenal stars Jordan Nobbs and Leah Williamson, to work hard and follow their dreams.



ATHLETIC BILBAO

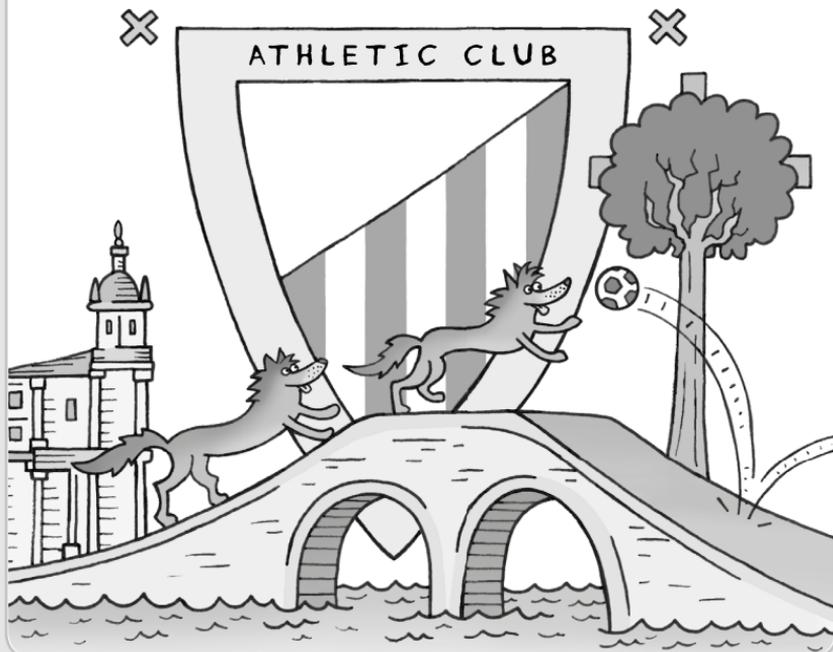


Nickname: *Los Leones* (The Lions)



Best of the crest:

The bridge and church are Bilbao landmarks. The oak tree represents the freedom of the Basque people. The two wolves and the X-shaped crosses are from the crest of the Haro family, who founded the city.



Mascot:

Harrotxu
the lion



Home kit:

Red
and white
striped shirt,
black shorts,
black socks



Stadium:

San Mamés,
Bilbao,
cap. 53,000

Spanish winners who Basque in glory

The biggest clubs tend to sign the best players, wherever they come from. What makes Spanish club Athletic Bilbao unique is that they only pick players from their local region, a talent pool of three million people. (Spain has a total population of 47 million people.) You might expect this policy to put Athletic at a huge disadvantage, but that doesn't seem to be the case. They are one of the country's most successful clubs, one of only three (the others being Real Madrid and Barcelona) never to have been relegated from La Liga, the top division.

The region of Spain around Bilbao is called the Basque Country, and the people who live there are called Basques. The Basques have different traditions to the Spanish. Many of them speak Basque, a language that is not related to any other in the world. Since 1912, Athletic has only picked Basque players. In Bilbao, success is local!

There are advantages to Athletic's "grow-your-own" approach. For example, everyone who grows up in the Basque Country supports the club, which means that their first-team players have been fans all their lives. Athletic players are prepared to give everything to their team, because the team represents who they are as people. "Athletic Club is more than a football club, it is a feeling," explained one former club president. "We see ourselves as unique in world football and that defines our identity." No wonder Athletic supporters are among the most passionate in Spain!



SAINTLY GUIDANCE

Athletic Bilbao (and Atlético Madrid) wear the red and white vertical stripes of Southampton FC, after a Bilbao student in 1909 brought home 50 Saints shirts from England.

The image that the Basques have of themselves is of a people used to working hard, respecting others and collaborating in a team. These qualities are reflected in the way Athletic plays. There are also practical reasons why it makes sense to attract, and keep hold of, local talent. Most of the new players in the team are promoted from the youth academy and so are used to the club, the players, the coach and the style of play. Their best signings are usually those they already have!

Athletic have had plenty to cheer over the years. Only Real Madrid and Barcelona have won more trophies in Spanish football history. The last of their eight league titles came in 1984 and in 2015 they won the Spanish Super Cup after beating Barcelona 5–1 over two matches. Over 50,000 fans spilled out onto the streets to celebrate that win.



In 2021, they won the trophy again: this time beating Barcelona 3–2 in a dramatic come-from-behind victory. (Sadly, the streets were empty after that success due to coronavirus pandemic restrictions.)

The other advantage that Athletic have over their rivals is the ability to keep players at the club for a long time. The reason for this is twofold: one, Athletic players are more emotionally connected to their club, so in less of a hurry to leave; and two, because Athletic don't spend huge sums on buying players, they can afford to pay their players a hefty salary. If a rival club want to buy an Athletic player, they have to pay an expensive transfer fee. Manchester City paid Athletic nearly £60 million for defender Aymeric Laporte in 2017 while, one year later, Chelsea paid over £70 million for goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga.

Athletic spent those funds on improving the youth academy to develop the next generation of players, rather than risking the money on a new signing who may or may not play well. From a business point of view, Athletic is one of the best-run clubs in the world.

Athletic fans are proud of their unique approach to football. They say they would rather be relegated with their team of locals than win more trophies with players from across the world. The team are connected to their city more than any other.

Everyone knows someone at the club and everyone is a supporter. If football is about creating a community and a sense of belonging, then Athletic Bilbao are true champions!



AUSTRALIA WOMEN



Nickname: The Matildas



Best of the crest:

The crest is an image of Australia's coat of arms. The kangaroo and the emu represent progress since they both find it hard to walk backwards. They are holding a shield with the badges of the six Australian states.



World Cup record:

Qualified seven times, three quarter-finals



Home kit:

Yellow shirt, green shorts, yellow socks



Stadium:

Rotates around the country

Matildas waltz to the World Cup with equal pay

The Matildas have shown grit and determination both on and off the pitch. One of the best teams in the world, they are captained by Sam Kerr, one of the best players in the world. They have also made a name for themselves by fighting for their rights – and winning!

In Australia, women who played for the Matildas used to get paid much less than the men who played for the Socceroos, the men's national team. They also trained at worse facilities. In 2015, shortly after the Matildas reached the World Cup quarter-finals, their best finish, the Australian football federation arranged two friendlies in the USA against the USA national team.

But the Matildas refused to go. They went on strike. Yes, they became a team of strikers – even the goalkeeper! The Matildas told the federation that they needed more money and better facilities if they were going to represent Australia abroad. Quite right too! Negotiations took a long time, but finally, in 2019, the Australian federation agreed that the Matildas would get the same deal as the Socceroos. (Norway, New Zealand, England and Brazil are other countries whose men's and women's teams now earn the same.)

The Matildas scored another victory shortly afterwards, when FIFA announced that Australia would co-host the 2023 Women's World Cup with New Zealand. Australia wants to use the tournament to shape a better world. Gender equality is a great place to start!



IN THE BAG!

The Matildas' nickname comes from Australia's most famous song, "Waltzing Matilda". The phrase is old Australian slang, meaning "to travel with all one's belongings in a bag".

ABOUT YOUR COACHES

Alex Bellos writes for the *Guardian*. He has written several bestselling popular science books and created two mathematical colouring books. He loves puzzles.



Ben Lyttleton is a journalist, broadcaster and football consultant. He has written books about how to score the perfect penalty and what we can learn from football's best managers.

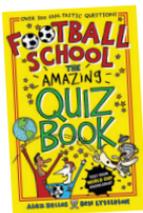
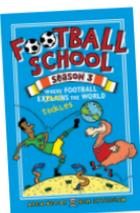
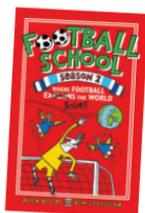
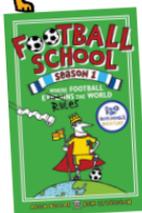


Spike Gerrell grew up loving both playing football and drawing pictures. He now gets to draw for a living. At heart, though, he will always be a central midfielder.

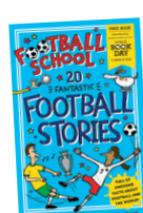
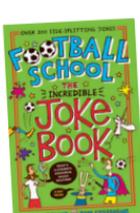


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