https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2016/jun/08/reading-childrens-books-better-footballer-euro-2016

**Thought for the Week:**

5th March 2018

**Why reading books can help you**

**become a better footballer**

**(Just before the Euros in 2016) Children’s author and**

**keen footballer Danny Scott on why books should be part of every footballer’s training regime**

*Danny Scott*

Footballer Jonathan Walters (Stoke City striker and Republic of Ireland national team) reading Roald Dahl’s BFG, one of his favourite books. Photograph: National Literacy Trust

A young man walks from the halfway line to the penalty spot. His country’s fans are dancing; their hope swoops and soars around him. He watches as his opposite number makes the lonely walk back to his teammates, shoulders hunched, and suppresses his sympathy. He knows what’s at stake.**– in pictures**

He places the ball 12 yards (10.97m) away from the two-metre goalkeeper who batters his crossbar for effect. It’s late. The air has cooled. In an hour it will be a new day. A thousand camera lights float behind the goal like fireflies.

A deep hush settles in the stadium. Who knew 60,000 people could become so quiet. Three paces back from the ball, the young man only notices the quiet inside. He’s lived this moment before a thousand times from the comfort of his imagination. He’s watched heroes fall and rise and fall again. He’s read many stories about men and women who have risked it all in a game of pitch-and-toss and lost, only to start again. And because of this, in this moment, he fears nothing.

As you are reading this, 552 footballers are making their way to France for Euro 2016. On their shoulders sits the weight of 24 countries’ hopes, dreams and fragile national self-esteem - the making or breaking of summer. A huge amount of pressure.

Danny Scott: The stereotypes of school sometimes suggest that people can’t be both bookish and sporty but, for me, that’s the wrong message for potential athletes.

From a young age, coaches will have worked hard with these footballers on their technique and fitness. But I wonder how many of them were encouraged to read books as part of their training regime. Are there book groups at Premiership academies? Perhaps there should be.

A long time ago, I remember being on an Under 18s football team bus travelling from Edinburgh to London and getting a book out of my bag to read on the long journey – my teammates started laughing at me so hard that I decided to put it back in my bag. Even my coach shook his head and said, “Danny, what are you doing mate?”

It’s a shame. The stereotypes of school sometimes suggest that people can’t be both bookish and sporty but, for me, that’s the wrong message for potential athletes. I think that reading can only aid athletic performance - especially at the very top where the pressure is so intense.

The coaching mission statements of Europe’s leading football associations all list similar character traits they want coaches to develop in their country’s next generation of talent. Concentration is key.

11-a-side football is an intense experience. Concentrating while 19 other outfield players swirl around you, for 90 minutes, is tough going. Perhaps the job might be made easier with regular reading. You could supplement your strategy sessions with time spent reading, say, a fantasy trilogy. Outside of practice, nothing is going to help your brain get better at processing multiple different outcomes from different ‘characters’ on the pitch.

Once concentration is demonstrated, today’s aspiring footballer must also display intuition, creativity and decision-making. Three qualities that surely make reading fiction, and non-fiction, an absolute necessity for anyone with serious soccer ambitions.

Indeed, why would any coach reject reading as a legitimate training tool. The hearts and lungs are worked through endless cardiovascular work so it follows that the body’s most complex organ, the brain, should get as much attention. As the greatest European footballer of all time, the late, great Johan Cruyff, said, “You play football with your head, and your legs are just there to help you.”

It is now a proven scientific fact that reading regularly enhances your ability to think on your feet and solve problems more quickly. And it’s not just your English skills that it helps. Books and reading are shown to help you get better at loads of other subjects, including maths.

Of course, reading is often a solitary activity and football is a team game. It requires 11 brains thinking as one – see Leicester this season. Lauded and rich from a young age, the modern professional footballer can sometimes lack the ability “to climb into someone’s skin and walk around in it” as the hero of [To Kill a Mockingbird](https://bookshop.theguardian.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird.html) Atticus Finch suggests we do. What Atticus Finch is describing is empathy and there is no better way to boost your ability to empathise with others than seeing the world through different people’s eyes in books.

It must be a manager’s dream to look out at a dressing room full of players who understand how their own mind works while also ‘getting’ how their teammates think. This is especially true in the world of international football where unfamiliar faces must get over club football differences to work towards a common goal. In fact, I’d bet a book token that no matter what happens at Euro 2016 the teams that build the deepest bonds will get the furthest in the competition.

Of course, they will also benefit from luck. You need luck in football. But, more than that, you need talent, self-belief and to work as hard as you can. Reading can’t make you lucky but it can help your mental performance on and off the pitch – coaches watch how you perform in both places. Books train your brain to think faster, harder and smarter. They will help you spot patterns where others see chaos. Reading about characters with different views on life than your own will help you get the most out of talented teammates who others have given up on. Who knows, reading might just give you the edge you need to reach the top - or at least to stay calm the next time you need to take a penalty.