



[www.megsmorrison.com](http://www.megsmorrison.com)

For all those Aussie kids, big and small, who have slogged it out on the parched football pitches of Australian suburbia and who, just like me, have dreamed of one day wearing the Green and Gold.

***Mark***

To the anonymous inventor of the ‘nutmeg’ – football’s icing on top of an already delicious cake.

***Neil***

# Megs

& The Vootball Kids

Neil Montagnana Wallace with Mark Schwarzer

bounce**b**ooks

[www.bouncebooks.com](http://www.bouncebooks.com)

Copyright © Neil Montagnana Wallace 2007  
First published 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Montagnana Wallace, Neil.  
Megs & The Vootball Kids

ISBN: 978 0 9 9803167 0 4

Cover illustration by Daniel Tonkin, Iron Monkey Studios  
([www.ironmonkeystudios.com](http://www.ironmonkeystudios.com))

Cover design by Leonard Montagnana, Woof Creative Solutions  
([www.woof.com.au](http://www.woof.com.au))

Internal design by Woof Creative Solutions

Schwarzer photography by Tim Clayton, Lindsay McNeill  
and from the family collection.

Edited by Gwenda Smyth

Distributed in Australia by Macmillan Distribution ([www.macmillan.com.au](http://www.macmillan.com.au))

Printed and bound by Tien Wah Press (PTE) Limited



[www.bouncebooks.com](http://www.bouncebooks.com)

## Mark's Shout-outs

There was many a time when I could have quite easily been lured to play the more popular codes of the day such as cricket or rugby league. So a huge thanks to my parents for helping me to keep sight of my football dreams. I'm grateful for their single-mindedness in supporting the hobby that has become my passion as well as my career.

## Neil's Shout-outs

Val comes first because she always will. A critical eye, some expert advice and an outstanding ability to cook pancakes are just the beginning. Walking home from school reading a book doesn't seem so strange to me now, kid.

Thanks to the Schwarzers for being so open and enthusiastic. Professional football is a team game off the pitch as much as on, and Team Schwarzer gets my ongoing admiration.

To Leonard for his enthusiasm, skill and talent. The clients come for the design, but they stay for the package. Bounce Books and Woof Creative are in safe hands.

Cheers to Dan from Iron Monkey Studios. You've brought Megs to a new range of senses.

Mark Haldane and Macmillan Distribution have been outstanding right from the start. And Gwenda – you are an editor extraordinaire.

Val's Grade 5VM-W at Essendon North Primary all get my thanks too – for being the guinea pigs, and for doing their bit to help.

Likewise to all the family and friends who took the time and gave me feedback along the way. Especially the real Jo Sheather.

And finally, a massive thank you to The Bean for pushing me on and firing me up. Yours will be a life worth living, baby Finn.

## Foreword

For me, football started out as something to pass the time. I grew up in the western suburbs of Sydney, far away from the distractions of the city. Out west, most kids played sport in their free time. There were few cinemas, skating rinks, bowling complexes or Time Zones – the diversions available to city kids. And in the ‘old’ days there were no Play Stations, X boxes, PSPs, email, mobile phones or computers. Moreover, money was tight. I was the second child of German immigrants who had come to Australia in the mid-60s in search of adventure and a better life.

Enter football, the one thing I could do that my parents supported, that was free, and that truly gave me a buzz. I still grin from ear to ear as I remember those uncomplicated days when playing football was all about fun and mateship. In my mind, I was Karl-Heinz Rummenigger (West German striker) as my friends and I tore around the paddock pretending we were the world football stars of the day. It seems like yesterday, and now it’s your turn.

I can’t imagine my life without football. This roller-coaster ride has given me a hobby, a job, a passion, a living and too many opportunities to mention. It has allowed me to travel, taste different foods, smell different smells and meet people from all walks of life, many of whom have touched me in some way. Sometimes it has allowed me to inspire and to be inspired. It has been, and continues to be, an education in life. For all that I am grateful. ‘Megs’ is a way of sharing my experience and all the happiness that football brought me as a young boy dreaming of football glory.

When I was fifteen someone asked me what I was going to be when I grew up. Naturally I said I was going to be a professional footballer. The next question was ‘What happens if that doesn’t work out?’. But in my mind, that was a wasted question – I was always going to make it, no matter what! With experience, I now

think that a back-up plan would have been a wise thing to have. I also wish I had been a better student and had read more. Like me back then, my young son Julian is football crazy, and he would much rather be kicking a football than reading a book. However, I've realised that he will read anything to do with football – and that is why Megs has become so important to me. If this story encourages kids anywhere in the world to love reading as well as love the game, then Megs will have been a success.

And I hope that Megs will inspire you to dream. Because in the face of doubt and difficulty – discipline, dedication and hard work can make your dreams come true.

*Mark Schwarzer*





# Contents



	Foreword	vi
	Some Stuff You Should Know	x
One	The Final Whistle	1
Two	The Other Side of the Planet	9
Three	A New Life	20
Four	An Unlikely Friend	30
Five	An Unusual Day	39
Six	Giving It a Go	54
Seven	Things Change	65
Eight	More Than a Game	71
Nine	When Does the Weekend Finish?	82
Ten	Watch and Learn	92
Eleven	Making a Difference	107
Twelve	What To Do?	132
Thirteen	Something a Bit Different	141
Fourteen	Plan B	149
Fifteen	What Now?	161
	Epilogue	175
	Q+A with Mark Schwarzer	184
	About the Authors	188

## Some Stuff You Should Know



### *Nutmeg:*

The hard, aromatic seed of the fruit of an East Indian tree, *Myristica fragrans*, used in grated form as a spice.

### **But more importantly...**

In football, and particularly with British football followers, 'nutmeg' refers to a cheeky trick where the person in possession pushes the ball through an opponent's legs and collects it again. This is sometimes called a 'megs' or a 'nuts'. The origin of the name is not confirmed, but here are some interesting suggestions:

#### *Rhyming slang*

Like *dead horse* for 'sauce' or *frog and toad* for 'road', some say nutmegs means 'through the legs'.

#### *Shaky movements*

When consumed in large quantities, nutmeg can be a stimulant, causing nervous shaking of the limbs and jerky movement. The football trick is said to have the same effect.

### *Phillip Lunch*

In the 1940s, Swindon Town striker Phillip Lunch used to eat several whole nutmegs before games, which would make his behaviour during play eccentric and unpredictable to the opposition. The ball through the legs became one of his better-known trademarks – hence the name.

### *Bull's testicles*

Years ago, nutmeg was used as a spice in the preparation of bull's testicles when served as a table delicacy. The testicles were removed from bull calves to make them steers. Thus the story goes that when a defender was 'burned' by a ball passed between the legs, all you had to add was nutmeg.

### *Plain old testicles*

Some people refer jokingly to testicles as 'nutmegs' due to their wrinkled appearance. Shouting 'Nutmegs!' when doing the football trick warned players that having the football between their legs was like having an extra testicle.

### *Nutcracker*

A nutmeg is a hard, round nut. To crack it, you need to put it between the legs of a nutcracker.

### **Any more?**

If you've heard of any other explanations of this bizarre name for a fantastic football trick, email Megs at: [megs@megsmorrison.com](mailto:megs@megsmorrison.com)

## *Vootball:*

If you've never heard of 'vootball', you'd better read on quick smart!



## One | The Final Whistle



The sun had finally begun to peek through the clouds by the time Megs and his dad reached the football ground, but the wind was still howling. Rugged up against northern England's late winter weather, Megs was still surprised how cold his face felt when he got out of the car – even with the club's winter jacket zipped high and his club beanie pulled low. The night's rain had left the pitch sodden and even icy in patches, but the game would still be on. 'It takes a referee with a heart colder than the weather to stop a kids' football match,' Megs's dad had said to Mr Wilson at the end of the party last night. 'These kids would be happy to play in Antarctica!'

Megs enjoyed having people over to his place, and he loved it when the whole family got together as well. He didn't have any brothers or sisters, but with friends and family like his, he never felt alone. Though he did wish they hadn't all been there last night. He wished he could've just watched some football DVDs like he

always did before a game instead of pretending to be having a good time.

‘So, are you looking forward to it?’ Woody’s mum had asked Megs.

‘Yeah, I think we’re ready for it. St Leonard’s are a good team, but they aren’t great, and we have a lot to play for. We could be champions tomo—’

‘No, I mean going to Australia,’ she interrupted. ‘Are you looking forward to moving to the other side of the world?’

Megs wished people would stop asking him that. If he had a choice, he would leave what he knew about Australia to *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* on the telly. No, he was not looking forward to moving to the other side of the world.

‘Yeah. Should be good.’ It was his standard response, and he was getting pretty good at it, too. Truth was, he didn’t know anything about Australia except that it was a long way away, it was sunny, there were kangaroos, his friends weren’t there, and they called football ‘soccer’. What was there to look forward to about that?

Of course, his mum and dad thought differently. They kept telling him that his dad just couldn’t turn down the opportunity for such a great job in such a great place. Megs thought that his dad was more excited about it than his mum, but the thought had crossed his mind that maybe his dad was just better at pretending than his mum. Whatever the case, they were going to Australia the day after tomorrow, and that was why

Megs's night-before-a-big-match routine had been changed by having all those people at his house. The family needed to say goodbye.

But enough of those thoughts.

There was the Liverpool Regional Under-11 Championship to be won today, and Megs wanted his last game with the Wanderers to be the best ever. He wanted this to be the *real* farewell party.

A smile crept across his face as he and his dad walked hunched against the wind and made it to the pavilion where his team-mates were gathering.

'Hey Megs, how ya feeling?'

'Pretty good, Jacko,' Megs replied with a shiver.

'Bit cold, huh?' said Woody.

'Hope you guys got some sleep last night.' Dan sounded grumpy. 'Billy's and my parents had the music up for *ages* after we left your place. We couldn't sleep until they went to bed at one am! And the place was a mess this morning, too!'

Megs laughed. 'I know. They get well embarrassing when they're together, don't they?'

'How is it that we're the quiet ones when they're all around?' asked Billy.

From tomorrow, Megs would have to leave all of this fun behind and go to live in a foreign country. Without friends, and as far as he knew, without football, either.



It was the coach, Mr McDonald, who brought Megs's depressing bout of daydreaming to an end.

'Righto, kids! Get yourselves inside, out of the cold and start getting changed. I'll be with you in a minute to go through the team. And besides, your little voices are giving us all headaches!'

Mr McDonald had been a professional player with Tranmere Rovers in the second division and was born and bred in Liverpool. He had even played twice for the mighty Reds, and that was enough to win him instant respect from Megs. (That, and the fact that he now worked as a salesman with a lolly company and brought them samples to eat after every game.)

Megs was a central midfielder with plenty of skill and a good football brain. He used to play up front, but Mr Mac thought he could make a better midfielder out of him, and he was right. Megs loved being involved all over the field, and found that setting up goals was just as good as scoring them. Well, almost, anyway. He was one of the stars of the team, and had played every match this season.

The boys made their way into the change rooms to see their crisp yellow and black uniforms hung up around the room in order by numbers. Their shorts and socks were folded neatly underneath, and every one of them had a black towel folded next to their clothes as well. Mr Mac thought it made a big difference to a player's confidence when they were treated well, and he did everything as professionally as possible for his

outstanding Under-11 team. He even insisted that every player's boots were spotless before each game and it seemed an essential part of the weekly pre-match speech to say to at least one team-member, 'How can you be a player if you don't look like a player and feel like a player? Go and clean your boots right now!'

Megs couldn't really see the point of all that cleaning when they were about to run around in the mud and would soon be filthy anyway. But the coach was the coach after all, and Megs's boots were as clean as new.

Five minutes later, the coach entered. 'All right, boys, take a seat.' There were never any parents allowed in the change rooms at this point. From here on, the boys were a team alone, and the only people in that room were those who had an effect on the game. Parents did not matter, teachers did not matter, and neither did 'telly-vision', 'that music' or the 'inter-web-net', as Mr Mac kept calling them.

'So it comes down to this,' he began. 'We beat this team and we'll be champions. If we lose or draw and West Docks wins, then we'll come second. So it's up to you. You lot've been the best team this year, and I think you deserve to be champions. But football can be cruel, and what *should* happen doesn't always work out that way. In the end, only you people in this room can make any difference to that – from the eleven that start the game to the ones on the bench. You are a team, and together you can win the championship for each other!'

Some kids had left Wendesley Wanderers because

their parents thought Mr McDonald was too serious and didn't allow enough fun. Sometimes Megs could see their point, but Mr Mac knew his stuff, and the fact was, Megs wouldn't have had such a good season if it wasn't for him. He also knew that Mr Mac wasn't the type of guy who would want to talk about the emotion of it being Megs's last game before going to Australia, and he liked him for that. Leaving the Wanderers, leaving Liverpool and leaving England was basically all Megs had been thinking about for the last month, but right now he didn't want to think about anything – including winning or losing the championship. He just wanted to play football.



By the time the Wanderers had trudged off the pitch at the end of the game, the sun had well and truly retreated behind heavy clouds and pelting rain. The proud black and yellow uniforms were now a sodden mess of brown, and faces were almost unrecognisable. Perhaps the mud would not have smelled so bad if they had won, but they hadn't, so it totally stank. A nil-all draw to finish the season and to send Megs on his way. Coffee-and-tea-carrying parents came to the boys to offer a hug and a smile, but the boys were shattered and felt just as bad as they looked. Hugs just wouldn't cut it.

Mr Mac offered grudging congratulations to the opposing coach, but in truth he also felt just like the

boys looked. He was only happy when he won, and with their rivals West Dock playing the worst team in the league, it looked as if the title would slip from their grasp.

‘There’s still a chance, Megs,’ said Mr Morrison, trying to console his son. ‘It’s not nearly time to quit.’

‘There’s nothing more we can do, Dad. We’ve blown it,’ sighed Megs.

‘Well, you’ve had a good season and learnt a –’

Dan’s dad ran shouting into the change rooms. ‘ONE ALL!! Somers Street held West Dock! Can you believe it! They hadn’t got a point all season until now! I just rang someone at their game – they drew one–one!’

‘Are you kidding? What does that mean for us?’ Mr Morrison’s voice was incredulous.

‘What does that mean? What does that mean? It means we’re champions! *Boys – we’re champions!*’ Dan’s dad exclaimed, waving his mobile phone above his head and doing a ridiculous Irish jig.

Megs turned sharply to his dad, eyes bright in his muddy mask as the reality of this news soaked in. A huge smile spread across the older Morrison’s face, followed by a chuckle, then a laugh, and a massive bear-hug for his grubby son. Megs laughed too, and whooped with delight.

The next thing he knew though, a chunk of sloppy mud slapped into the back of his head and trickled slowly (and coldly) down his back. He turned to see another clod of earth fly past his nose and collect his

father square in the chest. Their laughter turned to shock in an instant, before grins spread across their faces once more. ‘Well, that’s enough of that, my son,’ said Mr Morrison with mock sincerity. ‘Let’s get ’em!’

Megs’s last action as a Wendesley player and champion was a spontaneous, all-in, no-rules mud fight with players, parents and Mr Mac. By the end they were all covered from head to toe in mud, and quite a sight to see, but it was a better celebration than any championship trophy could ever have been. Megs could not have been happier.