

To my family

KILLER BOOTS

WENDY JENKINS



FREMANTLE PRESS

Not a Good Start

Matt Tognolini was having a bad day. It was only a scratch match, sure. And he was coming off a thigh strain — Fitzzy, the coach, had told him not to push himself too hard. But still, something was wrong. There should be more life in his legs, more spark in his blood. He felt as flat as the surf at South Beach.

And to make it worse, he was up against Justin Ayres, the star full-back, who had just changed clubs for big bucks. Justin was aggro at the best of times but now he really had something to prove.

Toggo moved a few paces forward. Justin followed and gave him a nudge even though the ball was at the other end of the ground.

‘Relax Ayre-head,’ Toggo said, without turning around. ‘It’s a scratch match, remember. And the cameras are on the ball. Or do you want to impress your mum?’

‘Ah, shut your mouth.’

Justin might be quick for a big man, but not with the dialogue. When he did ads for Carter’s bread, the sandwiches were better actors than him.

Justin bumped Toggo hard.

Right, Toggo thought. He had something ready for a situation like this.

*Carter’s bread, Carter’s bread,
Use our loaf and get ahead.*

Toggo sang, smiling widely at the big full-back. The ball was on the left flank, just behind the centre line. Little Dazza Nannup, the Dockers’ brilliant wingman, was hooking it in with a spare arm like it was a piece of washing hanging out to dry.

Justin Ayres looked at his opponent. Those were the right words he was singing. So what was this crazy guy doing? No, ignore him, he told himself. The coach had warned him not to listen to anything Matt Tognolini said.

*Get a head, get a head,
Use our loaf cos yours is dead.*

What was that? Had Justin heard it right?

*Get a head, get a head,
Use our loaf cos yours is dead.*

All Justin’s attention was going into not paying attention to Matt Tognolini. He wasn’t going to let this guy upset him, no way ... Toggo was trying to get him to go the thump. To get him reported and rubbed out for a couple of weeks ... Well, he didn’t come down in the last shower. He wasn’t going to fall for that one. And anyway, there was nothing wrong with his head ... was there?

Suddenly Toggo sprinted forward, leaving Justin flatfooted in the goal square. Little Dazza, screaming up the wing, hit his teammate cleanly on the chest with a perfect, no sweat, pass. The crowd roared.

Toggo moved back slowly to take his kick. *Carter’s bread, Carter’s bread.* He was singing softly to himself to steady his nerves. *Use your loaf and nail it dead.*

Well, he’d used his loaf in getting clear of Ayre-head. Now it was up to his boot to finish it off.

Toggo pulled up his socks, scraped his boots on the ground and thought about the kick. This would

be his first shot at goals for the season. It was important. It would set things up for the rest of the year. It was a difficult kick but he should be able to put it through. He wished he felt better; sharper, buzzier, lighter in the body. *Stop that, you'll make yourself miss.*

It's a big ask ... he's taking his time ... the TV commentator didn't sound too hopeful about Toggo scoring a goal. He seemed to be having trouble cranking up for the new season as well.

'Get on with it,' Rowan said to the TV screen. He was an Eagles fan and the Dockers had taken over from Essendon as the team he loved to hate.

Come on, Toggo, Greg begged silently. *You can do it, mate.* The Dockers had been his team from their first season in the competition and Matt Tognolini was his favourite player.

The man in purple and white ran in to take his kick.

'Look out,' Greg yelled. Rowan had reached for the potato chips and blocked his view. As they jostled on the lounge, Turley gave a yap and tried to join in.

'Miss! What'd I tell you,' Rowan said. The man in

the white coat had pointed one finger and was waving just one flag.

Justin Ayres retrieved the ball from behind the posts and kicked it back into play — straight to Darryl Nannup. Dazza booted it quickly back towards the goal square, where Toggo took an easy mark in front.

'He's gunna miss again, you watch,' Rowan said. But this kick was so close-in that even an under sevens player would have nailed it.

'Hah!' Greg said as the ball sailed through the goal posts. He thumped Rowan on the shoulder and Rowan pushed him back. Rowan was eighteen months older than Greg and usually won when they wrestled. He put Greg in a headlock and held him down while Turley licked his face.

Greg didn't make a sound but their father, Nick, seemed to know when something like this was going down. 'Cut it out, you guys,' he said from the doorway. Or maybe he just couldn't stay away from the TV set. He was a Dockers supporter like Greg and would much rather be watching the game than doing the accounts for his lawn mowing business.

Nick lingered in the doorway. The Dockers had possession of the ball in the back line and were

running hard. Handball, handball, handball, chip pass. Nick sat down on a chair — the accounts could wait for a minute.

Ben Norris, the Dockers centreman, laid boot to ball and drove it deep into the forward line. Toggo and Justin Ayres both went up for it and spoiled each other. Toggo stumbled forward — knee in the back. The whistle went. Free kick to Toggo.

This'll be a piece of cake, Greg thought. Toggo was only thirty metres out from goal and directly in front.

Toggo took a breath. There should be no problem with this kick but he just wasn't feeling right. Even the goal he'd taken from really close-in hadn't been easy. *Don't think that*, he told himself. *You're going to get this, no worries*. But he was worried.

Toggo knew as soon as the ball left his boot that it was a dog. Out of bounds on the full. A big razz went up from the opposition supporters, and a couple of the Dockers fans as well. *That was two misses out of three. Not a good start*.

Matt Tognolini kicked one goal seven points for the match. Even his mum listening on the radio would

have to admit that he'd missed some real sitters.

Greg Lukin felt every miss as if he'd made it himself. It was excruciating. Especially with Rowan cheering and making comments every time the ball went off the side of the boot. But it gave Greg encouragement in a funny kind of way. If a champion like Matt Tognolini could miss that often, and that badly, maybe there was hope for him this year. It was his first year up from the under thirteens. Playing in the under fifteens, he'd need all the help he could get.

A Fair Go, Okay?

‘We’ve heard you out. You’ve had a fair go, okay?’ Mick Taylor, the well-known footy commentator, was about to cut short another footy ‘expert’ who disagreed with him. It was only forty minutes into *World of Football* and already five listeners had rung in with suggestions about how Toggo, who was having ‘a horror start to the season’, could iron out his kick. One guy had even suggested that he put lead in his other boot as a counterweight.

Toggo, having a late breakfast on the back deck of his house, banged down his spoon at that. Dempsey, his old dog, jumped. Hell, Toggo thought. The armchair critics had started on him a couple of weeks ago and now they were really dishing out the advice. They’d be telling him to soak his boots overnight in jet fuel next.

It was a worry though. He just couldn’t seem to

get the right feel for the ball. The kind of feel where you don’t have to think, where the energy just flows through you, your boot, the ball, the air, the goal posts. He’d always had it before — even as a little kid kicking a plastic ball through the stacks of bean stakes at his family’s market garden.

He was a natural, they said. Sure, he’d trained really hard as he got older. And he’d done a lot of work on his strength (he was small and light for a full-forward). But this was just to make the best of what he already had — a ‘feel’, a gift. Until now it had never let him down. But something was definitely wrong. He knew it. There’d been a moment last Friday night against Essendon when he’d felt a sick empty feeling in his stomach as he lined up a kick. He’d known he was going to miss — and he did.

Dempsey put her head back down on her paws but her eyes stayed on Toggo. Dogs can’t read but she read him like a book. She knew as soon as he came through the door after a match whether the Dockers had won or not. ‘That dog’s amazing,’ Toggo’s girlfriend, Alison, would tell people. ‘If she knew how to count she would probably bark the score.’ But it wasn’t so hard. Dempsey knew it had to

do with bags, and balls, noisy men and smelly clothes. And, more recently, bags stacked in the hallway. When those were there it was a long time before Toggo came home again. And when he did, his mood told her everything.

‘I’ve seen it happen before, Mick.’ Another caller to *World of Football* was enjoying the sound of his own voice. Toggo groaned. ‘It can leave ’em just like that. Absolute champions one day — freaks you’d have to call ’em — could thread a ball through a turnstile. And then, next day, it’s gone, and they never get it back. They wouldn’t kick a goal if it was a dog that bit ’em on the bum.’

Toggo turned off the radio and picked up his car keys. Dempsey’s ears went up. ‘Sure girl, you can come. They just insulted you too.’

‘Hey, steady on,’ said Mick Taylor. ‘This is a family show.’

‘Who hasn’t heard of bum,’ said Greg, as he grabbed the last piece of toast from the plate. You had to be quick on your feet at breakfast time in his mother’s house when Ashley was around. ‘You’ve heard of bum, haven’t you, Ash?’

The twenty-month-old dribbled egg and frowned.

‘She’s heard, all right,’ said Rowan ‘Haven’t you seen the nappies? Babies are truly gross.’

‘They do have their down side,’ said Chris, their mother, wiping the egg off Ashley’s face.

‘When are they gunna stop bagging Toggo?’ Greg asked. Half the Sunday morning footy show had been taken up by people going on about him. It was like the hundred and four goals he’d kicked last year didn’t exist any more. All people could talk about was the last few weeks.

‘When he learns to kick straight,’ Rowan said.

‘He’s a great kick — he’s just having a bad run, that’s all.’

‘Yeah, like you. Your score’d be great if you could reverse the points and goals. Maybe you should try out for the Dockers. They couldn’t do any worse.’

‘They don’t need anyone while they’ve got Toggo. And anyway, my kicking’s not that bad.’

‘Yeah? What’d you kick yesterday, again? I keep forgetting. Was it one goal four or one goal five?’

‘You know what I kicked.’ Greg tried to concentrate on his toast and the radio, but he couldn’t stop thinking about how he’d played the day before. The problem wasn’t with getting the ball. He could scramble for it okay, and was a really

strong mark — that was why the coach had made him full-forward. The problem was getting the ball through the middle two posts. If he didn't kick straight next game he'd probably find himself on the interchange bench.

'I really enjoy it when you guys stay weekends,' Chris said. 'But can you spare the aggro, for breakfast time at least?'

'I didn't start it,' Greg said. 'He's always on at me. Thinks he's the only one around here who can kick a football.'

Rowan grinned. 'When I played under fifteens I kicked twenty-nine ten for the season. And I'm a wingman, remember, not a full-forward.'

'Bum,' said Ashley. 'Bummmmm.'

'Right on, Ash.' Greg pushed back from the table and grabbed his jacket. 'Excuse me. I'm going for a walk.'

'Will you take Ashley with you?' Chris knew she was pushing her luck. Greg was moody and grumpy these days and seemed to be spending a lot of time on his own. Maybe too much. 'She loves it when you take her. And it would help me a lot. I've got an essay due in this week.'

Greg was close to saying no, that he wanted to be

by himself for awhile. But Ashley shot him a look and was already struggling to get down off her chair and into the pusher.

He was a sucker for this little kid. He hadn't been too rapt when Chris had told him she was going to have a baby. Brett, her new 'partner', had been enough for him to take in right then. 'But you've already got your family,' he'd told his mother. 'And anyway, you're *old*.'

But from the first time he set eyes on Ashley in the maternity wing, so tiny but so there, he was sold. Some connection just happened.

'Okay,' he said. 'If you get her ready quick.'

Dirt

Toggo liked the feel of a road under him when he was in a well-made, well-tuned car. He liked the way the engine turned over smoothly and everything just flowed. It was like one of those magic passages of football where time slows, the energy focusses, you know in every cell of your body what to do, and you just do it. No sweat. It's like the ball plays you. Yeah, magic.

Well, he could do with some of that magic now.

When things got him down, or he was flat and tired after weeks of travelling interstate and heavy training, he liked to drive out to the market gardens. There was something about things growing, people working the soil, connecting with the dirt, that just made him feel good.

Now, as the houses began to thin out, and the browns and greens of the market gardens began, he

could feel his mood changing. This place was deeply in him. He'd grown up here. He knew the stories and the bad jokes, the smells and the different sounds. And he could pick tomatoes and heave spuds with the best of them. His parents had sold up and moved closer in when his father did his back and couldn't work the block like he used to. But they still kept an area nearly half the size of a footy oval under cultivation behind their house. They'd be farming the verges of any retirement place they were levered into. When it was in your blood, it was in your blood.

Dempsey loved the market gardens too. She was shifting and yodelling quietly on the passenger seat, sensing where they were going.

Toggo wound the window down a bit so she could push her nose out into the air.

His family had got her as a puppy, mostly for his little brother Peter, but she'd fallen in love with Toggo right away. For a while it looked like they wouldn't be able to keep her. She used to do wheelies through the seedlings chasing birds, and dig humungous holes in the rows of carrots and spuds. Then, just when it looked like they were going to have to find her another home, she settled

down and became part of the family. Apart from being a bit of a sugar freak — you couldn't leave cake or icecream anywhere near her — she'd become the best behaved of the lot of them.

'EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE — huh-glmp.' Huh-glmp was the sound Ashley made when they hit the bottom of the sandhill track going full bore. It was a cross between a swallow and a burp. She'd just had breakfast so she did one of those gross baby chucks on her jumpsuit but it wasn't too bad. This one was yellow with some white bits in it but it didn't pong like it did when it was milk.

Greg cleaned it up with a wet-wipe that was with the other baby junk in the pouch at the back of the pram. He'd done this a few times now and it was cool.

'Good one, eh, Ash? Did you like that?'

Ashley nodded and banged her heels. She was pretty game for a rug rat.

'More? Will we do it again?'

Greg hauled the pusher back up to the top of the hill. Usually once was enough for Ashley. Her eyes would be out on stalks and she'd be waving her arms and trying out baby words to the max. Fortunately

most of them weren't English so their mother didn't know what the high-pitched garble was about when they got home.

'Ready Ash?' Greg straightened the pram on the track. *Buh-rooooooooooom ... brooooooooooom.* It was great having a little kid to play with. You got to make all the uncool noises you had to give up in grade three.

The pram went hurtling down the hill.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE — fuh-lump. Fuh-lump was the sound Ashley made when she landed on her face in the dirt with the pram on top. Then there was no sound at all. For about four seconds. Then Ashley started screaming louder than she did at checkout counters when Chris wouldn't buy her anything.

Hell!

Greg rushed around to front of the pram and pushed it the right way up. Ashley had sand in her mouth, up her nose, on her tongue, on her cheeks. Anywhere there was snot or baby slobber it could stick to.

'It's okay Ash, sorry baby, it's all right, you're okay, that was a funny one, eh?' Greg was trying to convince himself as much as Ashley. He unstrapped

her from the pram and jiggled her up and down like a tea bag. When that didn't work, he walked her up and down, singing, while she slobbered on his shoulder and screamed.

Finally Ashley gave a splutter and a heave and shut up.

Greg checked her out. She seemed okay, apart from all the dirt she'd swallowed. She was mad as hell, though. All she had was her eyes and her little body to say so, but she was giving him heaps. It made him feel better somehow — that Ashley could get a message across.

'You're pissed off, eh? Fair enough. Wait till you can talk properly, Ash. You can really let rip then. What do you think you'd like to tell your dumb old brother, eh?' Greg was wiping Ashley's face with a wet-wipe. She'd dribbled and snotted most of the sand out onto his T-shirt but she was still a bit of a mess. Couldn't take her home like that, even if she was too young to dob him in.

Greg thought of the tap at the oval. He could clean her up there. 'Come on, Ash. Let's go to the swings.' Ashley gave him a black stare. She was either still pissed off, or not going to trust him with anything that involved being pushed or going up in the air.

A Dog's Life

The pram was a bit dusty but none the worse for wear. Greg strapped Ashley back in and set off for the oval. He stuck to the footpath this time and pushed her like she was a cranky old lady with brittle bones and he was a nurse with corns.

As he stopped to pull up some wild oats to give Ash to hold, he saw the car of his dreams. A red Mustang convertible slid past like it was floating on oil. A big black dog was sitting large as life on the front seat with its nose in the air like royalty. That is one lucky dog, Greg thought. If that was his car, he wouldn't let anything that could piss, scratch, slobber or fart, anywhere near the upholstery — including Ashley. Poor old Turley carried on like it was Christmas if Dad let him onto the front seat of their Toyota.

That Mustang was really something. When he

was a champion full-forward and signed a contract with the Dockers for megabucks, that would be the machine of his choice.

Toggo saw a kid straighten up from pulling out some grass at the side of the road. The kid's eyes went wide as dinner plates when he saw the car.

Toggo had mixed feelings about that kind of open awe at what he was driving. When he'd got his first big cheque and bought the restored Mustang, he'd been stoked. He'd wanted one since he'd seen a photo feature in a car magazine when he was ten years old. It'd felt great when he drove the car out of the dealers and everybody stared. It was like the class and the power of the machine said something about him. Like some of the power of the engine fed into him through his skin when his hands were on the wheel. He wasn't so sure now. He loved driving the car, but being stared at was less and less of a buzz.

Just up ahead was the oval he used to play on as a kid. He'd spent half his life there doing kick to kick with other kids and practising shooting for goal. Sometimes he'd completely lose track of the time and his mother would send his little brother Peter to find him.

Mum says to come 'n get yer lunch or else.

Piss off ya little worm. Tell her ya couldn't find me.

It had been fun then. No, more than that — it had been a passion. You had to be megakeen on the game to play it really well. Or, at least, he did. He wasn't a skills and percentages player like some of the other guys on the team. He followed the game plan mostly, but if he lost the keenness he lost the lot. It was all in the feeling. The trouble was — he had to admit it — the feeling was gone. Maybe that old bloke on the radio had been right. One day it just leaves you and you never get it back.

Toggo slowed the engine and turned the steering wheel hard left. Dempsey looked at him.

'Want to play footy, girl? Yeah? Yeah?'

Dempsey knew what Toggo meant. She could tell by the rhythm, and the way his voice went up twice at the end. He used to come in from school, grab some food, and call those words out to her just that way. Then they'd take off for the oval. Now she was yodelling in the back of her throat and her back legs were going like she was treading water. She had absolutely no respect for real leather seats.

When Toggo opened the driver's door, Dempsey

leapt over his legs and out like she was still a puppy. No one had told her she was an old dog. Right now, she'd take some convincing. She waited, thumping her tail against the side of the car, while Toggo got some balls and a pair of boots from the back seat. He always had a couple of pairs of the brand he endorsed rattling around in the car. He wasn't sure exactly how many. It had seemed funny at first, being paid to wear what had been a major budget item when he was growing up. His mother just hadn't believed how many pairs he went through. 'What do you do?' she used to ask. 'Slide down the quarry in them?' (The answer was yes but he never told her that.) Now, he just tended to take his boots for granted.

As he sat down to change out of his shoes Toggo felt that sick feeling in his stomach again. He took a couple of deep breaths to try to break the mood but the bad thoughts kept going through his head. He just had to get into form somehow. It wasn't only himself that he was letting down, it was the team and their supporters as well. And then there were the sponsors. Judging by his form in the last couple of weeks, the makers of the boots would be wishing they'd gone for the Eagles full-forward, Grantley

Bell, instead of putting their money on him.

He sat for a while, hoping the mood would shift. Dempsey's eyes were glued to him, trying to suss what was going on. Sometimes it scared him, how much that dog loved him.

'Come on, Demps.' Toggo pulled on his boots, stood up and looked around. The old place was still pretty much the same. New coat of paint, but still the same goal posts, same benches. Even the swings didn't seem to have changed all that much.

There was that boy again. Hell — he hoped no more zit farmers were going to turn up. He wanted to have a run and a kick without a mob of kids yelling 'Toggo' and lairing up with speccy marks and fancy kicks. The kid was trying to convince the baby he'd been wheeling around to have a go on the swings. If he was anything like Toggo had been with his little brother at that age, the baby was right to be really suss.

Toggo picked up the balls and jogged down towards the far goal posts. Dempsey bounded along beside him.

'Come on, Ash. I won't push you hard, promise.' Greg was using all the charm he had to persuade

Ashley to get into a bucket swing. ‘Look, it’s got sides — see.’ Ashley wasn’t having any of it. First he’d scared her half to death and dumped her face first in the dirt. Then he’d sponged her off under a cold tap and got all the front of her wet.

Greg sighed. He’d hoped pushing Ashley on the swing would dry her off. He didn’t think he could convince his mother that she dribbled that much. He looked up then and saw the Mustang parked on the other side of the oval. He couldn’t believe his luck. He bet there wasn’t another one like that in the State.

‘Come on, Ash.’ Greg shoved Ashley back into the pram. ‘Let’s go see the big red car.’

Up close, the Mustang was a thing to behold. It was a late sixties model, he was fairly sure, and really well maintained. The paintwork was perfect, probably a respray.

Greg shielded his eyes and looked inside. The interior was in great condition too — except for the passenger seat. That dog had made a real mess of it. There were scratches and scuff marks everywhere. The owner hadn’t even put a blanket down on the seat. What a dork! He didn’t deserve to have a car like this.

There were some boxes of football boots on the back seat and some boots loose on the floor. The guy must be really rich to be able to buy that many pairs of that brand at one go — and then just leave them lying around in his car.

Greg moved to the back to check out the chassis from that angle. The personalised number plate said ‘Dockers 8’. *Dockers!* No real Dockers supporter would treat a beautiful car like that. The owner even had the nerve to use Toggo’s number. Number eight was special.

Greg looked around. Where was the dork?

He spotted the dog first, and then the figure lining up for a kick at goals. *Miss, idiot.* Hang on! No, it couldn’t be ... it couldn’t be ... But that run up, that kick ... It had to be. Toggo.