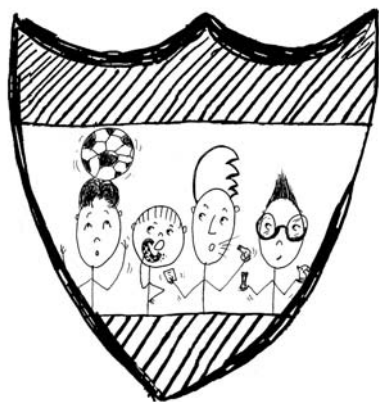


# STICK DUDES

CHAMPIONS OF THE WORLD



WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY  
FELICE ARENA

SCHOLASTIC

SYDNEY AUCKLAND NEW YORK TORONTO LONDON MEXICO CITY  
NEW DELHI HONG KONG BUENOS AIRES PUERTO RICO

CHAPTER ONE

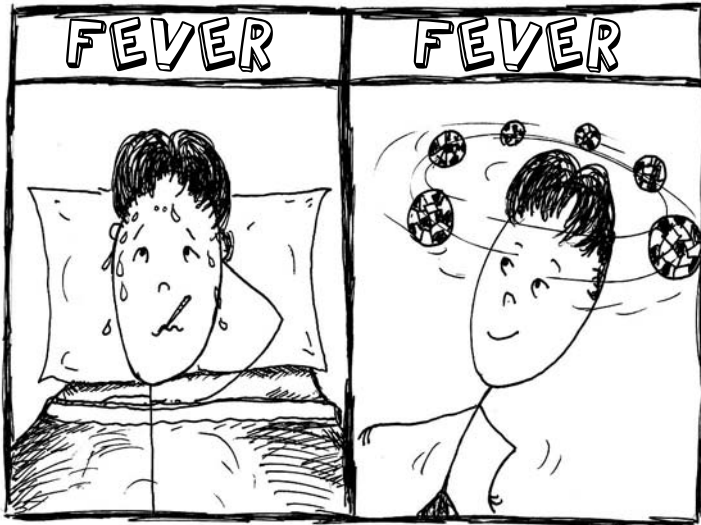
SOCCER  
FEVER






It all started when I caught the fever.

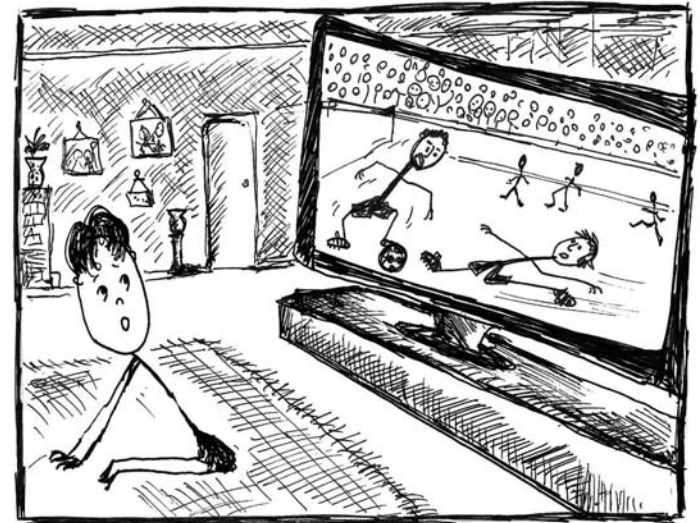
Not the sick I-have-a-temperature-as-hot-as-the-sun-and-I'm-sweating-buckets type of fever. It's more like the I'm-really-excited-and-I-can't-get-enough-of-it type of fever. And in this case, I had it bad. I had World Cup Soccer Fever.



On Tuesday morning I was watching one of the World Cup soccer matches on TV. I should've been getting ready for



school, but I was glued to the screen. It was as if my television had come to life and held some strange power over me, and I just had to keep watching.



'Keep watching me, Ben. Keep watching me, Ben. If you look somewhere else you'll miss something great . . . yes, that's it, don't take your eyes off me, Ben. You're my greatest friend, Ben . . . I have a crush on you, Ben . . .'





But to be honest, I didn't need a lot of convincing to watch one of the greatest games in the world. The World Cup matches have everything: action, drama, tears and excitement. Wow, talk about excitement! On Monday night, Australia had kicked a goal in the last minute of the match to score a win against Germany. I nearly wet myself with anticipation and exploded with relief! I was jumping up and down all around the living room and hugging our cat, Claws, as if I were the one who had kicked the winning goal!



Anyway, that Tuesday morning, I finally noticed Mum was calling for me.


'Ben! Breakfast! Come on!'

I hadn't really paid attention to her because Portugal had just been awarded a penalty shot against the powerhouse team of the world, Brazil.

'Ben, did you hear me? Switch that TV off NOW!'

Mum threw a pillow in my direction to break the invisible link between me and the TV screen. From the corner of my eye, I saw the pillow hurtling toward me. I quickly jumped to my feet and

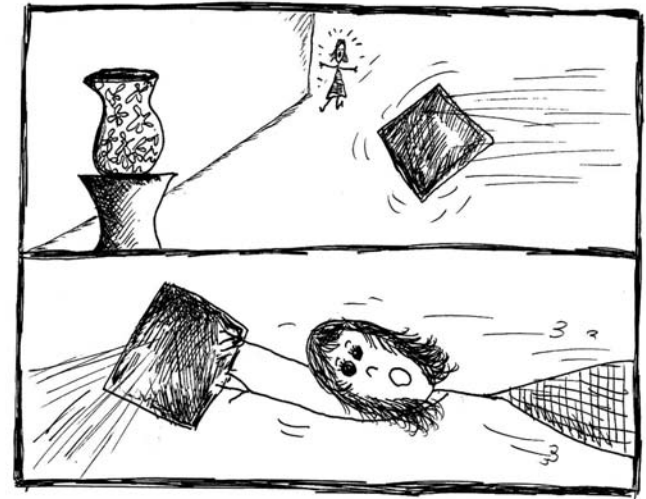




did a Ronaldo-like scissor-kick in midair. I booted the pillow back in Mum's direction. But the pillow had a mind of its own and veered straight for a priceless china vase. Mum's most prized possession, handed down to her by my great, great grandmother, was about to be smashed into smithereens, and it would be all my fault!



'Oh no!' I gasped. Mum's eyes popped out of her head as she bolted toward the pillow. Within a split second, amazingly, she was flying through the air. With her arms and body fully stretched, she lunged for the pillow, grabbing it as it



was just inches away from the vase. She did it! She saved the vase! Talk about a close call.

'Mum, you should be a goalie!' I cried out to her. 'That was awesome! I wonder if Brazil's goalie is as good as you. He needs to be if he's going to be able to save this penalty shot from Portugal.'

'What?' asked my mother, who had picked herself up and joined me in front of the TV. 'Portugal's got a penalty kick?





Why didn't you tell me that?'

I looked up at my mum and grinned. She had World Cup Soccer Fever too!

Later that morning when I got to school, everyone was playing soccer, including my best friends Marty, Tubs and Johnno.

'Hey Ben!' they shouted breathlessly as they sprinted towards me.



'Did you see Portugal beat Brazil? Talk about an upset!'



'And what about Australia and Germany! How awesome was that?'

'And after school, England takes on the USA!'

The fever had a hold of them too, as they all talked over the top of each other. Johnno started playing with his special World Cup-edition soccer ball. He tapped it from knee to knee. And then from foot to foot. And back up onto his knees again, without letting it touch his hands. We were all impressed. He's really good.

'Hey, Johnno, you should try to break the world record for juggling a soccer ball,' I suggested, even though I didn't know exactly what the record was.

'Yeah, all right,' said Johnno, who hadn't taken his eye off the ball. 'You time me.'





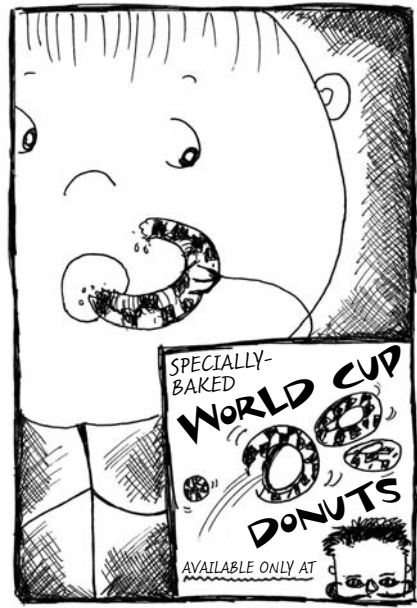
'I don't have a watch,' I shrugged.

'I do,' said Tubs, with his mouth full. 'But I'm kind of busy having breakfast at the moment.' Tubs loved eating. He

especially loved donuts.

'These are my specially-baked World Cup donuts,' he explained.

And they were too. They had black-and-white icing all over them and looked like mini soccer balls.



'Professor Donut is the greatest,' added Tubs, taking another bite. 'It's the best donut store in the world!'

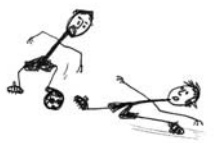
'Well, give me your watch. I'll time Johnno,' I said.

'I doubt he'll be able to beat the world record,' said Marty. 'According to *Guinness*, the record stands at twenty-four hours. Some English guy.' Marty read a lot of books and he knew a lot of interesting facts about everything.

'Yeah, well, who cares,' snapped Johnno, trying to maintain his concentration. 'Just start timing me, Ben!'

So I did. Two minutes later Johnno was still juggling the soccer ball. It was amazing to watch. Before we knew it, a crowd had gathered around us. I was praying the bell wouldn't go off.

'Keep going, Johnno!' cheered some





**Grade-5 girls.**

**When five minutes had passed, everyone started getting really excited. It seemed like Johnno was on his way to beating the world record, or at the very least, our playground record!**

