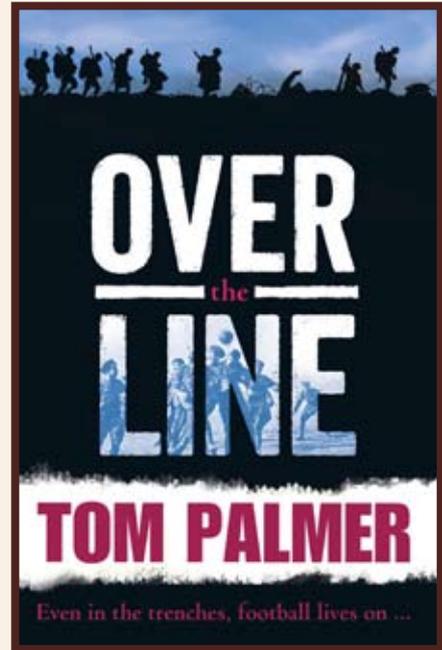




# Barrington Stoke

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION GUIDE



# TOM PALMER

## Over the Line

**PART 1** Synopsis and Themes

**PART 2** Ideas for Exploring the Text

**PART 3** About Tom Palmer

## PART I SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

“For 90 minutes I forgot the shellfire, the rats, the Germans, the rain, the cold and the fear I felt when I was above the parapet, listening to the night.”

Tom Palmer’s **Over the Line** is a story of sport – sport as one man’s life and Britain’s national obsession – and it is also an affecting and accomplished novel of World War One. It is based on the true-life story of Jack Cock, who scored England’s first international goal after the war. He did so as a veteran of the trenches. One of the first generation of pro footballers, Jack enlisted in the Footballers’ Battalion and went on to play in the Flanders Cup, a tournament arranged at the Western Front to boost troops’ morale. But Jack’s footballing duties spared him nothing of the horrors of the war, and he saw many of his comrades fall.

Tom Palmer’s **Over the Line** is a powerful novel accessible to mixed ability groups. At under 20,000 words and with dyslexia-friendly features, the novel is a perfect class or group read for KS2 or KS3 students exploring the First World War.

This guide has been compiled for teachers working with mixed-ability groups. It offers suggested discussion points for exploring elements of the author’s craft, plus ideas for exploring the themes of the book and suggestions for extension activities.

## PART 2 IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE TEXT

### PART 1: FOOTBALLER

#### Who am I?

Read the opening of **Over the Line**, up to **page 17**

In the prologue we hear that Jack has always dreamed of being a footballer but that his dream did not come true in the way he expected. We then witness his debut as a pro footballer at Huddersfield Town, when protestors storm the pitch, arguing that football should stop and footballers should go to war. Play resumes and Jack scores a goal.

The **narrator** of a book is the person who tells the story. The two most common types of narrator are:

#### FIRST-PERSON NARRATORS

A first-person narrator is normally a character within the story – often the main character. A first-person narrator tells the story from his or her own point-of-view and can only tell the reader what he or she experiences, understands or thinks. First-person narrators can only guess at other characters' feelings and thoughts.

You can spot a first-person narrator because he or she will use the words 'I' and 'me' to tell the story, for example: 'it all started when I got out of the wrong side of bed this morning.'

#### THIRD-PERSON NARRATORS

A third person narrator is not normally a character in the story and tells the story from 'outside' the characters' heads. Third-person narrators may be able to see inside the heads of many different characters, or none.

You can spot a third-person narrator because he or she will not use the words 'I' and 'me' but will use characters' names and 'he', 'she', etc, for example: 'It all began when John and Catherine got up on Saturday morning.'

Does **Over the Line** have a first-person narrator or a third-person narrator? How do you know?

Why does the group think that Tom Palmer chose to have a first-person narrator in **Over the Line**?

- o Does it make it easier or harder to see things from Jack's point-of-view?
- o Does it make the reader seem closer to the action?

Read **Page 1** again (the short section before Chapter 1). In this section, Jack speaks directly to the reader. How does this hook the reader in?

What are the group's answers to Jack's question: what do they dream of being when they grow up?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Read **Chapters 1 to 3** again carefully and note down the order in which the action happens. Use this information to create a match report about the game, including the protestors. Use scaffolding – if your students are less confident you may wish to do this as a group exercise scaffolding.

Remember you need:

- o A headline to grab the reader's attention (e.g. **Pitch Invasion at Town!**)
- o A sub-heading to summarise the article (e.g. **Protestors Disrupt match at half-time but play continues**)
- o The following sentence starters may also be useful:

*There were wild scenes at the game between Huddersfield and...*

*In the first half...*

*One player was making his debut...*

*From the beginning of the game there were protestors...*

*At half time, the protestors...*

*One of the protestors was...*

Look at match reports in local or national papers for ideas on how to report.

## SENSES

### Read chapters 4 and 5, up to P25

The Huddersfield players go to play Arsenal. They are very much the underdogs in the game and the Arsenal Manager, Henry Norris, attempts to take advantage of this fact, but Huddersfield turn this to their advantage and win the game.

Good writers help the reader to feel that he or she is inside the action. One way to do this is to tell the reader about all of the senses – taste, smell, hearing, sight and touch.

In the scene with Henry Norris, how many senses does Jack use when he describes the action?

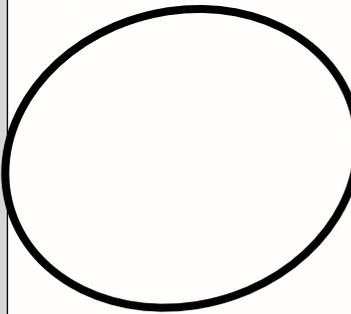
## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Make a list of the characters you have met so far in the book:

- o Jack, Huddersfield Town striker
- o Fred Bullock, Huddersfield Town Captain
- o Frank Mann, Huddersfield Town (a half back, although this information is not given in the novel)
- o Sid Wheelhouse, Grimsby defender
- o Percy Summers, Grimsby goalkeeper
- o Arthur Fairclough (name not given in the novel), Huddersfield Town 'gaffer'
- o Chris Buckley, Arsenal Captain
- o Henry Norris, Arsenal

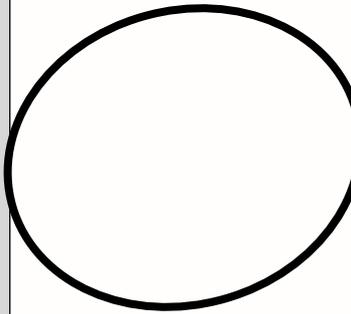
Make notes on what the book tells about each of these characters and use the internet to find out more. Make football collectors' cards featuring each of these, following this examples:

**JACK ▶**



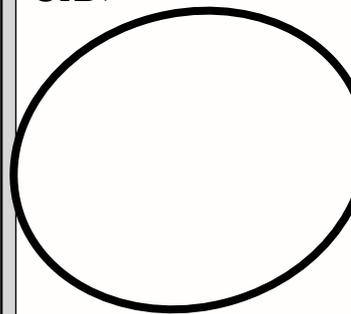
Goals Scored	
Height	
Skill (1-10)	
Speed (1-100)	

**PERCY ▶**



Goals Scored	
Height	
Skill (1-10)	
Speed (1-100)	

**SID ▶**



Goals Scored	
Height	
Skill (1-10)	
Speed (1-100)	

## FOOTBALLERS AND COWARDS

### Read up to P31

Jack goes to London to enlist in the army. He meets Sid Wheelhouse, who has already joined up, and Percy Summers, who also plans to join. The officer who takes Jack's details recognises him as a footballer.

Share these statements. Which is true?

- Jack is excited to have joined the army. He knows it is the right thing to do. He wants to be a soldier, not a footballer. He made up his mind right away when he was asked.
- Jack does not want to join the army. He has been forced into it. He thinks it is the wrong thing to do. He would prefer to be a footballer. He took a long time to make up his mind as he didn't want to join.
- Jack does not really want to join the army but he thinks it is the right thing to do. He is a footballer and now he will be a soldier. It took him a long time to make up his mind but it is a relief now that he has.

What does the group think about what newspaper men and the protestors from Chapters 1 and 2 are saying about footballers?

- o Were they right to say footballers in 1914 should go and fight?
- o Were footballers any different from anyone else?

Discuss the tactics used by the newspaper men and protestors. They say bad things about footballers who have not joined up. Does the group think this is an effective way to persuade them? Do the group think a good way to persuade people to do something is to make fun of them or insult them if they do not?

- Yes, it will work because they will be ashamed.
- No, it will not work because they will get angry at being insulted.
- It may work because they will be ashamed or it may not because they may be angry.

What other ways are there to persuade someone to do something? Think about the modern world – what is available now that was not available in the First World War? (*television advertising, online marketing*)

We might call the way Jack is persuaded to join up 'negative marketing' – he is persuaded that there will be a bad result if he does not. By contrast, lots of advertising is 'positive marketing' – a manufacturer tells a customer that his or her life will be better.

Can the group think of any modern or historical examples of positive and negative marketing? Our starters may help.

NEGATIVE MARKETING	POSITIVE MARKETING
Seat-belt advert	Toothpaste advert for white teeth

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Create a poster to encourage footballers to join the army in World War One. Think about:

- **Whether you will use a positive message or a negative message.** Will you tell footballers they can make a big difference, or tell them they will suffer if they don't fight?
- **The pictures you will use.** Will you use a soldier, or a footballer, or both?
- **The words you will use.** Will you have a slogan, such as *Winners on the Pitch, Winners at War* or *Score a Goal for your Country* or similar?

Look at these examples of recruiting posters from World War One for ideas.



2. Use the playscript from [www.readingwar.co.uk](http://www.readingwar.co.uk) of the scene when Jack enlists to prepare a rehearsed reading.

## PART 2: VOLUNTEER

### Read from P34 to P44

In this section Jack has a break from training as a soldier to play with the Footballers' Battalion in Cardiff. He realises that the aim of the game is to persuade football fans to enlist.

Discuss with the group the role models that are important to them. What order would they rank these role models in, from 1 (most important) to 8 (least important)?

- Teachers
- Other adults at school
- Friends
- Mums

- o Dads
- o Brothers/sisters
- o Famous people
- o Other

Discuss whether these role models affect the things that the group choose to do. In **Over the Line**, the football fans in Cardiff sign up because they see the footballers have signed up. Would this work on the group if it happened today?

Make a list of ways sportspeople and other famous people affect the things we do (e.g. footballers or singers can set fashions for hairstyles or clothes, sportspeople can set fashions for more people taking up their sport).

**Read to P48.** *Focus on Buckley's speech*

Do the group think that they would shout along with Jack and the other soldiers if they were there, listening to Buckley? Is Buckley's speech effective?

Buckley says: 'This war we are going to fight will become known as the greatest war in history'. The effect of this is quite sad. Why? What do modern readers know that Buckley does not?

**Read to the end of P51**

Images can make writing better by helping to make a strong impression in our imaginations.

At the end of this section, Jack thinks 'it was so dark that the train felt like it was at the bottom of the sea.' This is an especially strong image because it links the darkness outside the train with the fear all the men feel about torpedoes attacking the boat they will take to France.

Can the group think of any good images for the experiences below?

- o *the plane was tossing around so much that it felt like...*
- o *it was so cold that my fingers felt like...*
- o *we were so afraid that we felt like...*

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Gather adverts in magazines and newspapers that use famous people to sell products.

Discuss why the group thinks each company has chosen the celebrity in their advert.

## PART 3: SOLDIER

**Read to P60**

In this section Jack reaches France – the first time he has set foot on foreign soil. His introduction to the trenches is a series of night marches in miserable weather.

In this section, Tom Palmer evokes many senses again to bring the new setting to life. List the different ways Jack experiences France and then the trenches through his different senses.

Sight	Sound	Taste	Smell	Touch

### Read to P66

In this section Jack takes the first watch over No Man's Land. A soldier he knows in the next section of trench winks at him and soon after is shot.

Jack composes a letter to his parents in his head before MacDonald is shot. After MacDonald dies, Jack tries to hold himself together for his men. If he could write a truthful letter home to his parents, what might he write?

### Read to P72

As well as fear, Jack and his men are bored and physically uncomfortable in the trenches. Some of the men wage a war on the rats. Jack is looking forward to his first Flanders football game.

Has the group ever experienced a situation in which:

- A. they were very bored and ended up devising a task or game for themselves to pass the time?
- B. they were having a difficult time but a treat they were looking forward to helped them to get through?

### Read to P76

The battalion play in the first round of the Flanders Cup. Jack dominates. Woodward is very upset that he does not have a look-in all match.

Think back to what football means to Jack in the trenches. Does that help to explain why Woodward is so upset that he does not get to play?

### Read to P80

Woodward volunteers for bomb clearance and is seriously wounded while clearing a bomb from a section of trench near Jack's.

Why do the group think Woodward volunteers for bomb clearance after the first round of the Cup?

### Read to P98

In this section the Battalion take a crater in No Man's Land as a base for an attack on the German trenches. Summers is badly wounded in the push and Jack requests permission to find him and bring him to safety.

Think back to earlier discussions of what football means to Jack and what it meant to Woodward. As the fighting gets worse, does football become more or less important to Jack? What is your evidence?

**Read from P117**, focusing on the power of the storytelling, the horror of the war and Jack's increasing dependence on football as an escape valve.

### Read the epilogue

Jack's dream comes true – he plays his debut for England. But it is bittersweet.

Stories are very often written in the past tense (I saw, he said, she thought). Sometimes, authors use the present tense instead (I see, he says, she thinks). When the present tense is used to tell a story in this way, we call it the historical present tense or the narrative present tense.

**Look at P129**. Is it in:

- the past tense.
- the historical present tense.

Discuss why you think Tom Palmer chose this tense:

- o does the action seem more or less 'immediate' and real?
- o does the reader feel more or less like he or she is there, standing in Jack's shoes?
- o Are the group rooting for Jack? How do they feel about his goal? How does Jack feel?

## PART 3 ABOUT TOM PALMER



Tom Palmer is one of Barrington Stoke's reading heroes. He credits match reports and other football-related reading with getting him into books as a child, and he has gone on to get many thousands of boys and girls into reading with his own sports stories.

Tom stays in touch with his readers through a huge programme of school and library visits every year and this really shows in the perfect pitch of his writing.

Tom lives in Yorkshire and is a fan of Leeds United. He is also a keen fell runner.

You can find out more about Tom at his website, [www.tompalmer.co.uk](http://www.tompalmer.co.uk).