

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

FEVER  
PITCH

*"Funny, wise and true."*

*—Roddy Doyle*

*"A small classic."*

*—Michael Palin*

*"The funniest book of the year."*

*—GQ*

AUTHOR OF HIGH FIDELITY AND ABOUT A BOY

NICK HORNBY

**Nick Hornby** is a graduate of Cambridge University, and a teacher turned writer. He is the author of the bestselling novel *High Fidelity*, and a forthcoming novel called *About a Boy*. He lives in north London, within walking distance of the Arsenal ground.

**WINNER OF THE WILLIAM HILL  
SPORTS BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD  
VOTED *SPORTSPAGES* BOOK OF THE DECADE**

"An absolutely marvelous book. It is hard to believe many better books have been published this year on any other subject."

—*Guardian*

"Brilliant...What really makes the book isn't nostalgic whimsy but Hornby's digressions on everything from male rites of passage, fannish superstitions and football and class, to the rootlessness of '60s suburbia."

—*I-D*

"Vividly captures the elation and utter despair of a love affair with a particular team. Stirring stuff."

—*Mail on Sunday*

"A smart and wonderful book."

—*New Statesman*

"Impressive. Witty, eloquent, and determined to hide nothing. His triumph is that, without glossing over its large-scale stupidities and discomforts, he makes the terrace life seem not just plausible but sometimes near heroic in its single-minded vehemence, its heart-shaking highs and lows."

—Ian Hamilton, *Independent on Sunday*

"*Fever Pitch* is a sophisticated study of obsession, families, masculinity, class, identity, growing up, loyalty, depression and joy."

—Brendan O'Keefe, *Observer*

"The best football book I've read in years. It is, in turns, funny, passionate, thought-provoking and perceptive."

—*The Absolute Game*

"Brilliantly told."

—*Sunday Express*

continued . . .

"Funny, brilliant, relentless."

—Matthew Sturgiss, *Independent on Sunday*

"Highly entertaining. It is, perhaps, the first book that gives a credible explanation of why someone becomes a supporter."

—*Times Saturday Review*

"[Hornby is] the best author of my generation."

—Julie Birchill, *Sunday Times*

"An excellent book. Non-football-lovers and supporters of other clubs will find much in it to enjoy. Arsenal supporters will find it a classic to treasure."

—Clive Anderson, *Sunday Times*

"He has put his finger on the truths that have been unspoken for generations. Furthermore, he writes beautifully. *Fever Pitch* is a damn good read."

—*Irish Times*

"Never overstated, consistently enjoyable, often quite moving, utterly convincing....[T]he best book about football ever written."

—*Modern Review*

"We rose to applaud *Fever Pitch*. A compulsory text."

—Giles Smith, *Independent*

"Good books about football could be counted on the teeth of Nobby Stiles's upper jaw....*Fever Pitch* is a small classic."

—Michael Palin

**Praise for Nick Hornby's debut novel**  
**HIGH FIDELITY**  
**A New York Times Notable Book**

“One of the top ten books of the year.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“As funny, compulsive and contemporary a first novel as you could wish for.”

—*GQ*

“It is rare that a book so hilarious is also so sharp about sex and manliness, memory and music.”

—*The New Yorker*

“Hornby captures the loneliness and childishness of adult life with such precision and wit that you'll find yourself nodding and smiling. *High Fidelity* fills you with the same sensation you get from hearing a debut record album that has more charm and verve and depth than anything you can recall.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Hornby's seamless prose and offhand humor make for one hilarious set piece after another, as suffering, self-centered Rob ruminates on women, sex and *Abbey Road*. But then he is forced to consider loneliness, fitting-in, death and failure—and that is what lingers.”

—*Spin*

“Keep this book away from your girlfriend—it contains too many of your secrets to let it fall into the wrong hands.”

—*Details*

*Also by Nick Hornby*

**HIGH FIDELITY  
ABOUT A BOY**

Z712.6

H814

# *Fever Pitch*

NICK HORNBY

RIVERHEAD BOOKS, NEW YORK

Most Riverhead Books are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotions, premiums, fund-raising, or educational use. Special books, or book excerpts, can also be created to fit specific needs.

For details, write: Special Markets, The Berkley Publishing Group, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.



## RIVERHEAD BOOKS

Published by The Berkley Publishing Group

A member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

200 Madison Avenue

New York, New York 10016

Copyright © 1992 by Nick Hornby

Cover design by Archie Ferguson

Cover photograph by Color Day/Image Bank

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.

First published in Great Britain by Victor Gollancz Ltd 1992.

First published in the United States of America by Penguin Books 1994.

Penguin edition ISBN: 0-14-023729-1

First Riverhead trade paperback edition: March 1998

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint extracts from the following copyrighted works:

*The Selected Stories of Andre Dubus*. Reprinted by permission of Picador.

*Out of His Skin* by Dave Hill. Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber.

*The Hustler* by Walter Tevis. Copyright © 1959 Walter S. Tevis. By permission of The Walter Tevis Copyright Trust. All rights reserved.

The Penguin Putnam Inc. World Wide Web site address is

<http://www.penguinputnam.com>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hornby, Nick.

Fever pitch / Nick Hornby.—1st Riverhead trade pbk. ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: London : Gollancz, c.1992.

ISBN 1-57322-688-2 (pbk.)

1. Soccer—Great Britain. 2. Hornby, Nick. 3. Authors, English—20th century—Biography. I. Title.

[GV943.2.H67 1998]

796.334'0941—dc21

97-46501

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my mother, and for my father*

I'd like to thank Liz Knights for her tremendous support, encouragement and enthusiasm; Virginia Bovell for her tolerance and understanding; Nick Coleman, Ian Craig, Ian Preece, Caroline Dawnay and Viv Redman.



## INTRODUCTION

SUNDAY, 14TH JULY 1991

It's in there all the time, looking for a way out.

I wake up around ten, make two cups of tea, take them into the bedroom, place one on each side of the bed. We both sip thoughtfully; so soon after waking there are long, dream-filled gaps between the occasional remark – about the rain outside, about last night, about smoking in the bedroom when I have agreed not to. She asks what I'm doing this week, and I think: (1) I'm seeing Matthew on Wednesday. (2) Matthew's still got my *Champions* video. (3) [*Remembering that Matthew, a purely nominal Arsenal fan, has not been to Highbury for a couple of years, and so has had no opportunity to watch the more recent recruits in the flesh*] I wonder what he thought of Anders Limpar.

And in three easy stages, within fifteen, twenty minutes of waking, I'm on my way. I see Limpar running at Gillespie, swaying to his right, going down: PENALTY! DIXON SCORES! 2-0! . . . Merson's back-heel flick and Smith's right-foot shot into the far corner in the same match . . . Merson's little push past Grobbelaar up at Anfield . . . Davis's swivel and smash against Villa . . . (And this, remember, is a morning in July, our month off, when there is no club football of any kind.) Sometimes, when I let this dreamy state take me over completely, I go on and back, through Anfield '89, Wembley '87, Stamford Bridge '78, my whole footballing life flashing before my eyes.

'What are you thinking about?' she asks.

At this point I lie. I wasn't thinking about Martin Amis or Gérard Depardieu or the Labour Party at all. But then, obsessives have no choice; they have to lie on occasions like this. If we told the truth every time, then we would be unable to maintain relationships with anyone from the real world. We would be left to rot with our Arsenal programmes or our collection of original blue-label Stax records or our King Charles spaniels, and our two-minute daydreams would become longer and longer and longer until we lost our jobs and stopped bathing and shaving and eating, and we would lie on the floor in our own filth rewinding the video again and again in an attempt to memorise by heart the *whole* of the commentary, including David Pleat's expert analysis, for the night of 26th of May 1989. (You think I had to look the date up? Ha!) The truth is this: *for alarmingly large chunks of an average day, I am a moron.*

I would not wish to suggest that the contemplation of football is in itself an improper use of the imagination. David Lacey, the chief football correspondent for the *Guardian*, is a fine writer and an obviously intelligent man, and presumably he must devote even more of his interior life than I do to the game. The difference between Lacey and me is that I rarely *think*. I remember, I fantasise, I try to visualise every one of Alan Smith's goals, I tick off the number of First Division grounds I have visited; once or twice, when I have been unable to sleep, I have tried to count every single Arsenal player I have ever seen. (When I was a kid I knew the names of the wives and girlfriends of the Double-winning team; now, I can only remember that Charlie George's fiancée was called Susan Farge, and that Bob Wilson's wife was called Megs, but even this partial recall is terrifyingly unnecessary.)

None of this is *thought*, in the proper sense of the word. There is no analysis, or self-awareness, or mental rigour going on at all, because obsessives are denied any kind of perspective on their own passion. This, in a sense, is what defines an obsess-

ive (and serves to explain why so few of them recognise themselves as such. A fellow fan who last season went to watch Wimbledon reserves against Luton reserves on a freezing January afternoon on his own – not in a spirit of one-upmanship or some kind of self-mocking, laddish wackiness, but because he was *genuinely interested* – recently strenuously denied to me that he was eccentric in any way).

*Fever Pitch* is an attempt to gain some kind of an angle on my obsession. Why has the relationship that began as a school-boy crush endured for nearly a quarter of a century, longer than any other relationship I have made of my own free will? (I love my family dearly, but they were rather foisted on me, and I am no longer in touch with any of the friends I made before I was fourteen – apart from the only other Arsenal fan at school.) And why has this affinity managed to survive my periodic feelings of indifference, sorrow and very real hatred?

The book is also, in part, an exploration of some of the meanings that football seems to contain for many of us. It has become quite clear to me that my devotion says things about my own character and personal history, but the way the game is consumed seems to offer all sorts of information about our society and culture. (I have friends who will regard this as pretentious, self-serving nonsense, the kind of desperate justification one might expect from a man who has spent a huge chunk of his leisure time fretting miserably in the cold. They are particularly resistant to the idea because I tend to over-estimate the metaphorical value of football, and therefore introduce it into conversations where it simply does not belong. I now accept that football has no relevance to the Falklands conflict, the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War, childbirth, the ozone layer, the poll tax, etc., etc., and I would like to take this opportunity to apologise to anyone who has had to listen to my pathetically strained analogies.)

Finally, *Fever Pitch* is about being a fan. I have read books written by people who obviously love *football*, but that's a

different thing entirely; and I have read books written, for want of a better word, by hooligans, but at least 95 per cent of the millions who watch games every year have never hit anyone in their lives. So this is for the rest of us, and for anyone who has wondered what it might be like to be this way. While the details here are unique to me, I hope that they will strike a chord with anyone who has ever found themselves drifting off, in the middle of a working day or a film or a conversation, towards a left-foot volley into a top right-hand corner ten or fifteen or twenty-five years ago.

1968–1975



## HOME DÉBUT

ARSENAL v STOKE CITY

14.9.68

I fell in love with football as I was later to fall in love with women: suddenly, inexplicably, uncritically, giving no thought to the pain or disruption it would bring with it.

In May '68 (a date with connotations, of course, but I am still more likely to think of Jeff Astle than of Paris), just after my eleventh birthday, my father asked me if I'd like to go with him to the FA Cup Final between West Brom and Everton; a colleague had offered him a couple of tickets. I told him that I wasn't interested in football, not even in the Cup Final – true, as far as I was aware, but perversely I watched the whole match on television anyway. A few weeks later I watched the Man Utd–Benfica game, enthralled, with my mum, and at the end of August I got up early to hear how United had got on in the final of the World Club Championship. I loved Bobby Charlton and George Best (I knew nothing about Denis Law, the third of the Holy Trinity, who had missed the Benfica match through injury) with a passion that had taken me completely by surprise; it lasted three weeks, until my dad took me to Highbury for the first time.

My parents were separated by 1968. My father had met someone else and moved out, and I lived with my mother and my sister in a small detached house in the Home Counties. This state of affairs was unremarkable enough in itself (although I cannot recall anyone else in my class with an absent parent