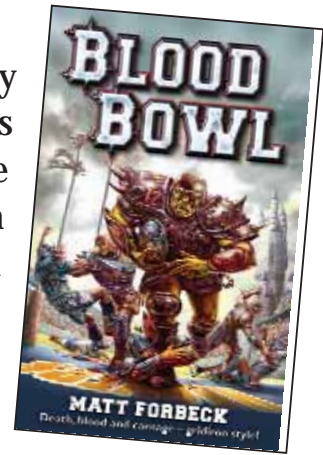


Blood Bowl

A Blood Bowl novel by Matt Forbeck

Welcome to the delightfully twisted fantasy world where humans, elves, goblins and ogres work out their aggressions not on the battlefield, but on the football field. When talent scout Slick Fullbelly spots Dunk bringing down a chimera with a spear from a hundred paces, he's sure that his search is over. Slick works for the Bad Bay Hackers, and they need a new thrower. Dunk is about to be plunged headfirst into the insane world of Blood Bowl, the fastest, meanest sport in this dark and brutal world. Dunk puts down his sword and steps off the battlefield... onto the football field.



Matt Forbeck has worked full-time in the adventure game industry for over 15 years. He has designed collectible card games, roleplaying games, miniatures games, and board games, and has written short fiction, comic books, and novels. Blood Bowl is his first novel for the Black Library.

Blood Bowl can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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from BLOOD BOWL

DUNK EDGED BACKWARDS as the creature came towards him, but it matched him step for step. As he moved, he spoke. 'I'm terribly sorry,' he said to the creature, hoping it might somehow be able to understand him. 'I was looking for a dragon.'

The goat-head snorted.

'You come from Dörfchen,' the snake-head hissed. It spoke the Reikspiel tongue of the Empire flawlessly, although with an oddly familiar accent that Dunk identified as hailing from distant Kislev.

The lion-head uttered a curious growl. 'You're earrrrly,' it said.

Dunk could have sworn the lion-head smiled. 'You... you were expecting me?' he stammered. He hefted his sword, testing its weight, just as he had before every sparring match against his trainers back in Altdorf. He'd never been in a real, to-the-death fight and he hoped they'd taught him well. This time there would be no mercy, he was sure, only blood.

'Our last sssacrifisse was not sssso long ago,' said the snake-head.

'It's a boonus,' the goat-head said. 'Our reputation grooows.'

'Yessss,' the snake-head said. 'It drawsss usss fresssh vic-timsss.'

'Frrresh meat!' the lion-head said.

'Ah,' Dunk said. He had wondered why the villagers had been so eager to point out the location of this 'dragon's' lair to him. Old Gastwirt had even offered to draw him a map. Now it was clear. They depended on foolhardy heroes like himself to find their way up here regularly to make their regular 'sacrifices' to

their local menace. In return, the creature left the hamlet alone. No wonder they'd been so friendly and free with such a total stranger.

'I'm afraid there's been a mistake,' Dunk said as his heart sunk into his boots. 'I wasn't sent up here as your next meal.'

'Explaaain!' the goat-head said. The lion-head snapped its jaws to punctuate the demand.

Dunk swallowed hard. 'The kind and dedicated people of Dörfchen,' he said, 'fear that you might be... tiring of your standard fare. They sent me up here to take your order for your upcoming repast.'

The three heads looked at each other, mystified.

Dunk continued, amazed that he could still speak and stunned at the words escaping his lips. 'Would you prefer a virgin of some sort? Or perhaps a nice little goblin? I'm told we might even be able to procure a few snotlings, or perhaps a little gnoblar to chew on?'

Three sets of eyes narrowed at Dunk. As the light from his bottle-lamp began to die, he noticed that all six orbs glowed green with the crazed light of Chaos.

'Of... of course, you can just stick with your standards.'

The lion licked its muzzle with a black, forked tongue.

'I really do recommend the snotling though,' Dunk said softly. 'It's much tastier than the hu-human.' His voice trailed off as he finished.

'Posssssibly,' the serpent-head said as it weaved hypnotically back and forth, like a snake trying to turn the tables on an unwary charmer.

'But you'rrre herrre,' the lion-head growled.

'Nooow,' the goat-head bleated. With that, the great beast slouched forward.

As the lion-head leaped out towards Dunk, he slashed at it with his blade. The never-bloodied edge cut through the creature's mane and trailed a splatter of blood in its wake. The lion-head yowled in pain and surprise, and the goat squealed in protest.

Emboldened by his success, Dunk brought his sword back for another swing. As he brought the blade forward, though,

the snake-head darted out and struck the weapon from his hand. It sailed off behind him, and he heard it land clattering in the pile of what little was left of the chimera's past victims. Dunk gawked for a moment at his empty hand, sure that his bones would soon join the others.

The trio of heads loosed terrifying laughs. The cacophony startled Dunk into action. He gripped hold of the only thing he had left, the barely burning bottle-lamp, and hurled it at the creature with all his might.

The earthenware bottle smashed into the creature right where its three heads met. Its noxious contents splashed across the chimera's chest and necks, and burst into flames. The blaze blossomed against the chimera, and the three heads screamed in an unholy choir of fury and fear.

Dunk glanced back over his shoulder to where his sword had gone spinning away, but the back of the cave was shrouded in utter darkness. He'd have a better chance of finding a wishbone than his blade in that mess. Turning back towards the chimera, which was trying to beat out the flames engulfing each of the heads by banging them against each other, he realised there was only one way out of the cave: past that burning beast.

With a strength fortified by desperation, Dunk lowered his shoulder and charged directly at the monster. 'Keep low and move through your foe,' he heard Lehrer say, the old trainer's voice echoing in his head. 'The low man has control.'

Only this wasn't a man that Dunk faced but a beast three times his size. Still, he hoped, the same principle should apply.

The fire had blinded the chimera, and it was turning away towards the cave's entrance when Dunk barrelled into it. He caught it directly below one of its wings and knocked it sprawling into one of the cavern walls. Without stopping, he spun away from the creature, flinging himself around the beast and past it toward the twilight sky beyond.

Dunk was giddy with glee as he sprinted for the exit. If this experience had proved one thing to him, it was that he wasn't ready to die quite yet, especially if it meant becoming a twisted abomination's next meal.

As Dunk reached for freedom, though, something hard and sharp slammed into his back, its meaty tip stabbing through his armour and into the flesh beneath. Lights flashing before his eyes, Dunk tumbled forward, out of the cave, letting the force of the blow push him further from his foe.

When he finally came to a stop, Dunk scrambled to his feet and whipped about, fearful that the winged beast would come roaring out of the cave after him. From the trio of screams emanating from the flickering lights still flashing from the cavern mouth, he guessed that the beast was too busy saving its own life at the moment to finish taking his.

Dunk's left arm was numb from the shoulder down and hung limp in its socket like a piece of meat. For a moment, he feared the blow might have severed the limb, but he checked with his good hand, and it was still there. He was wondering what was wrong with it when the numbness started to fade, only to be replaced with the excruciating sensation of a thousand fire ants biting into his wounded arm. His stomach flipped about like a dying fish pulled from its cool river home and slapped down on the cruel wood of a sun-warmed dock. He bent over and retched.

Wiping the remnants of his last meal from his mouth and soaked in the stench of the Dörfchen liquor that had tasted like embalming fluid as it erupted from his gullet, Dunk realised what had been done to him. Angry and nearly blind, the chimera had lashed out at him with its two-eyed tail and stung him with its venomous barb. He had escaped its lair, but it seemed that he could not outrun the effects of its wrath.

'Never let it be said that I didn't flee with the best of them,' Dunk said to himself as he stumbled down the mountainside, wondering how he was going to be able to find his black horse as the last rays of daylight raced from the sky.

When Dunk came to, he found himself lying over the saddle of his horse, which was standing outside the Crooked Arrow. The night was fully dark now, although a light burned inside the place, visible through the cracks in the thick, but poorly

fitted shutters that covered a window in the upper floor of the grey-plastered building.

Dunk slid from the back of Pferd and shook his head to clear the sheets of cobwebs that he felt had accumulated there. The brisk night air bit into his face and whistled through the hole in the back of his armour, poking him awake. He tested his arm and found that although it still hurt he could move it once again. The fire ants had apparently fled for a more hospitable home, one that didn't have a chimera angry at it.

Dunk tripped forward and steadied himself against the inn's scarred oaken door. It was quiet inside and dark but for the light above. It must have been late, the regulars had long since gone to bed. He knocked on the door and waited, listening.

In the room above, he heard a pair of voices, a man and a woman, arguing in hushed tones. Then the light went out.

Dunk knocked on the door again, louder this time. Only the crickets in the distance answered. He looked up and down the wide, unpaved road. The few other shops and houses that lined what could only charitably be called the centre of the hamlet were all dark too. The people who resided within them, resting easily in the shadow of the monster-infested mountain, another 'sacrifice' – Dunk, in this case – having recently been sent off to placate the neighbouring beast.

This time, Dunk banged on the door with all his might, his mailed fists making dents in the already battered, ironbound planks. 'Open up!' he shouted at the top of his lungs. 'Open up, now!'

He'd been trying to help these ungrateful bastards, and they'd as good as sent him to a certain death. Somebody was going to pay.

'Go away!' a voice rasped down from above. Dunk looked up to see Gastwirt leaning out through the now-open shutters, his long hair like strings of greasy white cotton and his flimsy nightshirt, which barely covered his massive gut, fluttering in the breeze. 'We're closed for the night!'

'You'll open up for me, damn you!' Dunk shouted up at the innkeeper, shaking his fist at the bewildered old man. 'After what I've been through, I've earned the right to a warm bed tonight.'

Gastwirt squinted down at Dunk and then ducked back inside for a moment. When he reappeared, he held a lantern high in one arm, and he peered down again to see who might be so bold as to make such demands. 'You!' the innkeeper said, recoiling in horror as he recognised Dunk's face. 'You're supposed to be dead!'

'And you're supposed to be an innkeeper!' Dunk shouted back at Gastwirt. 'Let me in, and give me a bed. I'm hurt!' He rubbed his shoulder as he said this, wondering just how bad it was.

Gastwirt peered down at Dunk, suspicion etched on his doughy face. 'How do I know you're not a ghost come back for your revenge on our fair town?' he asked. 'No one else has ever returned from the creature's cave alive.'

Dunk pulled off his right gauntlet and flung it at the innkeeper. The metal glove smacked Gastwirt right in his bulbous nose and then dropped back down to the ground where Dunk retrieved it.

'Could a ghost do that?' Dunk asked as the innkeeper howled in protest.

At that moment, the front door creaked open. Dunk stared into the darkness beyond, ready for a guard of some sort to spring from the shadows. He looked down and saw the small figure standing there framed in the doorway, barefooted, dressed in a grimy, once-white nightshirt and holding a small oil lamp.

For an instant, Dunk thought that the newcomer was a child with dark and curly hair, perhaps a son or grandson of Gastwirt's, who'd been roused by the arguing. Then he noticed the traces of stubble on the little person's chin and the wrinkles around his wide smile and dancing grey eyes.

'Now, son, I ask you, is that any way to make a reasonable request of your host?' the halfling said.

'Morr's icy breath!' the innkeeper cursed above. 'What are you-' He leaned further out the window until he could see the halfling waving up at him from the inn's threshold.

'Shut that door!' Gastwirt shouted before he disappeared back into his bedchamber, slamming the shutters closed behind him as he went.

The halfling held out a hand of greeting towards Dunk and waved for him to come inside. 'I'd hurry yourself in here quickly, son, before that walrus makes his way down those stairs. He'll double bar the door for sure.'

Dunk reached back and wound Pferd's reins around the hitching post outside the inn, then slipped in past the halfling while nodding his thanks.

'I'm glad someone around here understands hospitality,' he said. He stuck out his hand at the halfling. 'I'm Dunk.'

'Slogo Fullbelly,' the halfling said, his hand almost disappearing within Dunk's much larger mitt.

'Slick, you stinking bastard!' Gastwirt howled as he slipped down the last few stairs and fell onto his rump in the back of the room.

'Slick, to my friends,' the Halfling said in a confidential tone.

The innkeeper leaped to his feet far quicker than Dunk would have guessed the man's bulk could allow. 'You've no friends here, you sawed-off con artist,' Gastwirt said, shaking a finger at Slick.

Dunk stepped between the innkeeper and the halfling before Gastwirt could wrap his thick paws around the little one. 'He did me a good turn when you refused,' he said to the innkeeper.

Gastwirt looked up at Dunk, just a hint of green haloing his face. 'I don't open the door for anyone I don't know after dark,' he said. 'Not when I've sent everyone else home.'

Dunk stepped closer and glared down into the shorter man's watery blue eyes. 'I met you earlier today.'

'And sallied off to certain death, just like all the others, sure that providence and your own sheer arrogance would let you rule the day, to kill—' The innkeeper cut himself short. 'By the gods' grace and mercy,' he said in awe, 'did you actually kill the beast?'

Dunk grimaced, suddenly aware of how much his shoulder still hurt. 'I made it back alive, but not unscathed.'

'Ooh,' Slick said from behind Dunk. The would-be hero turned and saw Slick standing on a nearby table, peering at his back. 'That's a mighty nasty-looking hole you have in your armour there, son,' he said.

'It's nothing...' Dunk started to say, but he couldn't bring himself to finish. 'It hurts like blazes,' he conceded.

'Allow me,' Slick said, reaching up to unfasten the buckles that held Dunk's breastplate and backplate in place.

'You can't do that here!' Gastwirt complained. 'I can't have wounded strangers stumbling into my place in the middle of the night.'

Dunk growled at the man, then reached over and snatched a long, sharp spear from where it hung over the massive mantel in the room. He shoved its wicked, barbed tip towards the innkeeper and growled again, the pain from his sudden movements tainting his wordless threat with a dose of desperation.

'I think, kind sir,' Slick said to the innkeeper gravely, 'that you'd better make friends with this man quickly if you don't wish to find yourself thrown out of your own establishment.'

Gastwirt looked up into Dunk's pained eyes. The warrior could see the thoughts whirring through the man's brain as he weighed the risks of the various avenues of action open to him. Then the innkeeper's shoulders sagged in resignation.

'All right,' said Gastwirt as he padded towards the open door and shoved it shut, then dropped two bars of solid, ironbound oak behind it. 'Let's be quick about this.' The innkeeper returned, firing up a lantern that hung from the ceiling in the centre of the room.

'Sit down, son,' Slick said to Dunk, 'and I'll have a look at that trouble of yours.'

Dunk slumped in the chair nearest the table on which the halfling still stood. He yanked his breastplate and chestplate off with one hand, but when it came to slipping out of the mail shirt, he found it hurt too much. With a wave from Slick, Gastwirt ambled over and helped the halfling pull the damaged, bloodied armour off, as well as the undershirt beneath it.

The innkeeper gasped in horror at the sight of the puncture wound in Dunk's back. Slick just clucked his tongue and ordered Gastwirt to hustle off to the kitchen and bring back a bucket of water and some clean rags. 'It's not as bad as it looks,' Slick told Dunk. 'I've seen far worse.'

‘Are you a physician?’

The halfling chuckled. ‘Hardly, son. I’m a Blood Bowl player’s agent.’

Dunk turned and gave Slick an appraising look. ‘For which team?’ he asked.

‘I work for my player,’ Slick said. ‘Negotiate his contracts, defend his honour, get him as much time on the pitch as I can, for the most pay. Some agents handle a handful of different players all at once, but I prefer to concentrate on one star player at a time. That kind of dedication to personal service makes all the difference.’

‘Who’s your player?’

Slick looked over to where the dying embers still glowed soft and red in the inn’s fireplace. ‘I’ve had a lot of them over the years.’

‘Who is it now?’

Gastwirt burst back into the room right then, half a bucket of sloshing water in one hand and a fistful of grey, threadbare rags in the other. He set the things down on the table next to Slick, who took one of the rags and dipped it into the bucket.

As the halfling gently rubbed the wet rag around the area of Dunk’s wound, cleaning the blood away, he said, ‘Let’s just say I’m between clients at the moment. Blood Bowl is a dangerous game.’

‘I’ve never seen a match.’ Dunk suspected that Slick was talking so much just to distract him from how much the rag stung. Either way, he was willing to go along with it.

‘Really?’ Gastwirt said in excited disbelief. ‘If I’d lived in a big city, I’d go to the matches every week.’

‘I’ve never much seen the point of it,’ Dunk said, gritting his teeth as Slick rubbed more water into the wound. ‘A bunch of grown people – or dwarfs, or elves, or orcs, or ogres or worse – chasing a football around a field? Why bother?’

‘Because,’ Slick said as he dried Dunk’s shoulder and wrapped it with another rag, ‘it pays better than thievery.’ As he finished up, he patted Dunk on the shoulder and handed him back his bloodstained undershirt. ‘Besides, people who

go off looking to pick fights with dragons shouldn't speak ill of the career choices of others.'

'I'll take that under consideration,' Dunk said.

'You're a lucky man,' Slick said as he slid down off the table and picked up his candle from where he'd left it. 'The poison of a sting like that can be fatal.'

As the words left Slick's mouth, Dunk's head started to spin again. 'I just wish I was dead.'

'Let's get this boy a bed,' Slick said to Gastwirt.

'Right away,' the innkeeper nodded. He led Dunk to a door in the back corner of the common room. It opened onto a private quarters little larger than one of the closets in the family keep in which Dunk had grown up. A bed of straw lay scattered in the far corner. The young warrior stumbled over to it and lay down his head. He was asleep before the innkeeper shut the door.

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