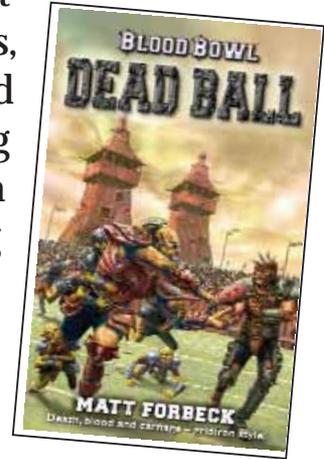


DEAD BALL

A Blood Bowl novel by Matt Forbeck

Dunk Hoffnung has tasted success on the football field after his team, the Bad Bay Hackers, competed at the very highest level of Blood Bowl. But Dunk soon reconsiders his playing career after half of the team are killed in a match against the Chaos All Stars. Never being one to admit defeat, the Hackers Coach insists that the team must get back on the horse, so they find themselves heading to the mist-shrouded land of Albion to compete in the Albion Cup. Can the Hackers beat the odds and win or will the pressures and distractions of fame get in their way?



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.

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Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US)

Bookshops: Distributed in the UK by Hodder. Distributed in the US by Simon & Schuster Books.

Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.

UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000

US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME

Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop's web store by going to www.blacklibrary.com/store or www.games-workshop.com

PUBLISHED BY THE BLACK LIBRARY

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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ISBN: 1 84416 201 X



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from DEAD BALL

THE LAST THING that went through Henrik Karlmann's head was the spike on the front of the football.

Dunkel 'Dunk' Hoffnung, star thrower for the Bad Bay Hackers, stood close enough to Henrik to catch the lineman when he fell. The ball juddered from Henrik's forehead on its long, sharp tip. His dead eyes were crossed, still trying to focus on the thing that had killed him, his arms caught halfway up to where they would have been needed to save his life.

'And Karlmann's down!' Bob Bifford's voice echoed through the stadium via the Preternatural Announcement system, magically audible over the near-deafening roar of the crowd. 'Ooh, Jim, that's going to leave a mark!'

'More like a marker, Bob – over his grave!'

'That's already three in the kill column for the Chaos All-Stars today, Jim. Do you think they could break their team record?'

'To do that, they'd have to top their TPK from the Chaos Cup playoffs against the Stunted Stoutfellows. The Hackers are a bit tougher than halflings at least.'

'I always thought it should be TOK for Total Opponent Kill, Jim.'

'Well, Harry "The Hammer" Kehry coined the phrase back in 2482, and he never could spell. When he said "Total 'Ponent Kill', would you argue with him?'

'Not unless I wanted to end up like poor Karlmann there. Let's hope the Hackers have a generous funeral insurance plan. It looks like they're going to get a lot of use out of it.'

Dunk's silvery eyes took one look up at Chthton – the octopus-armed beast that had thrown the bullet-like ball at his friend – and snarled. In one swift move, he snatched the ball

from his fallen friend's forehead and tucked it under his arm, taking care not to stab himself on its bloodied spikes. With the slavering, tentacled beast in the all-black helmet and jersey bearing down on him, Dunk had no time to get rid of the ball by passing it downfield. First, he had to scramble clear.

Dunk jinked to the left then broke right, but the Chaostainted Chthton spread his tentacles wide. One of them wrapped around Dunk's arm as he tried to dash past, its wet, puckered cups adhering to Dunk's shoulder pad and holding fast.

Dunk heard the fluid from Chthton's tentacle flowing down his armour, sizzling as it went. Where it dripped off the shoulder pad onto his bare bicep, it burned like a red-hot brand. The second-year thrower howled in pain and pulled on the hard-stuck tentacle like an ox hauling a plough.

Chthton snorted something green and wet as he pulled back against Dunk, and the young Hacker felt his forward progress grind to a halt. He looked back at the warped creature and growled in pain, anger, and frustration. If he didn't break free of Chthton soon – if the creature managed to tackle him – this game might be his last.

A thin hand shot out and hacked down at the tentacle, cutting it in half. As Chthton fell backward, blood spurting from the maimed stump of its arm, Dunk stared at his saviour.

Gigia Mardretti stood nearly as tall as Dunk's six feet. Long, black hair cascaded from beneath her golden helmet, on the side of which a green, block H was emblazoned, overlaid with three crossed swords that followed the lines of the letter. Blood ran down her arm where it had sliced through the overstretched tentacle. She bore a satisfied little grin on her ruby-painted lips.

The blade embedded in the edge of Gigia's gloves was illegal in Blood Bowl. In this sport, the players – and their armour, and maybe the ball – were supposed to be the weapons. Using anything else in the course of a match broke the rules.

Not that anyone paid much attention to the rules, including the referees. Perhaps especially the refs, who seemed to have taken their dangerous jobs just so they could solicit large

bribes. Some sold themselves to both sides, their loyalties swapping back and forth faster than they could pocket their money.

‘Thanks!’ Dunk said as he spun to face back toward the All-Stars’ end of the field. Henrik had fallen deep in the Hacker’s territory, and now Dunk stared down eighty yards of Chaos-infested Astrogranite standing between him and the goal line.

A pair of All-Star blitzers came stampeding down the field toward Dunk as he cut right, looking for some daylight. None of his team-mates were open downfield, so he sprinted to the right, hoping to find some blockers or at least keep out of the blitzers’ grasp until he could get rid of the ball.

‘Would you look at that human run?’ Bob’s voice thundered over the PA. ‘He looks like a halfling being told mealtime’s almost over!’

‘You’d run for your life too if the All-Stars had the kind of grudge against you that they have for poor Hoffnung,’ said Jim. ‘Don’t you remember what happened when they met in the Chaos Cup finals last year?’

‘How could I ever forget? It’s not often you see someone kill the opposing team’s captain in the middle of halftime. Not to say that players don’t try it all the time, but to succeed, that’s something else.’

‘Especially against a mutant minotaur like Schlitz ‘Malty’ Likker. That bull had a six-pack of horns that could open most players up like a keg of ale. What was Hoffnung’s defence again?’

Dunk tried to shut out the blather coming over the PA. None of that mattered now. The Hackers had lost that game, and it had been over six months ago. In the world of Blood Bowl, that was a dozen lifetimes past – maybe more if you added in how many players the Hackers had lost just today.

Lars Englehard stepped up between Dunk and the two All-Stars on his tail. The lineman lowered his shoulders and took out both of them at once. It wasn’t until Dunk heard Lars start to scream that he wondered if the All-Stars weren’t really after the ball anyway.

‘I think Hoffnung said that Malty was “possessed by a daemon,” Bob said with a laugh. Jim joined in.

'I think half the All-Stars on the field today might meet that criteria. And what about Nurgle's Rotters?'

'Too true, Jim. If we start removing players for any kind of possession, we won't have many teams left!'

As Dunk stiff-armed a goat-headed blitzer wearing a carved-up All-Stars' helmet, he thought perhaps that wouldn't be such a bad idea. The game was lethal enough without adding daemons from hellish realms of Chaos into the mix.

The goat-man's horns sprang forward and clamped around Dunk's forearm like the jaws of a tiger. His vambrace there protected his flesh from being torn away, but when he tried to pull his arm free he discovered he was caught. The goat-headed creature bleated in low, guttural glee as it raked at Dunk's face with its arms, which ended in cloven hooves.

Dunk swung his free arm around and stabbed the spiked ball up under the goat-man's chin with desperate strength. The horns fell slack as the All-Star went silent and slid off Dunk's hand.

'Now that's a turnabout for you,' Bob said. 'Hoffnung gets free, and the Hackers chalk up their first kill for the day.'

'That ball's getting a lot of action out there today, Bob. I'm glad to see they brought "Ol' Spikey" back for the Spike! Magazine playoffs. Believe it or not, some people complain that a ball like that makes the games too deadly.'

Bob scoffed at Jim. 'That's like saying you can have too much Bloodweiser after the game. Wait, I didn't think we were talking about what happened to you last night. I don't think I've ever seen an ogre that tipsy.'

'That's not fair,' Jim said. 'Vampires like you can't get drunk.'

'Right,' Bob said sadly. 'Now that's unfair.'

'Such is unlife.'

Free from the goat-man, Dunk scrambled back to his left, saw two more All-Stars blocking that way, and dropped back to his right again. Then he saw what he wanted: an open Hacker downfield.

Percival Smythe stood near the end zone in his green and gold uniform, sweeping his arms up and down in the universal signal for 'I'm wide open!'

Dunk cocked back his arm and hurled the ball down the length of the field. It flew in a perfect spiral, the spikes spinning around its sides like a set of lethal wheels. Dunk wondered, not for the first time, how anyone could catch a pass like that without getting killed, but thankfully that was Percy's problem, not his.

'Oh, that's a beautiful pass!' Bob's voice said. 'And not an All-Star within 10 yards of Smythe!'

'Yeah,' Jim said, 'but do you see Mackey?'

Dunk glared down the field and wondered what the announcers were talking about. Mackey Maus was the All-Stars' new team captain, the one who'd taken over after Likker's death, but he wasn't anywhere near Percy. No one was.

The crowd, scores of thousands strong, roared as the ball sailed into Percy's grasp. The noise drowned out anything else, so he didn't hear the footfalls of the player who came up behind him and slammed him into the Astrogranite.

'Hackers score!' Bob's voice said, his magically enhanced voice ringing out over din.

Dunk would have cheered, but he found that he couldn't breathe. The player on top of him had driven the air from his lungs. He tried to push himself up on his arms, and something hit him hard in the back of the head. If not for his helmet, the blow would have caved in his skull. As it was, he felt the metal protecting his cranium dent in and dig into his scalp. Stars danced before his eyes.

'Enjoy those cheers,' Dunk's attacker shouted, 'until I tear off your ears!'

A long, sharp talon reached under Dunk's neck and slashed at his throat. He felt something give and then wetness. Adrenaline coursed through Dunk's veins, despite the fact he thought it was too late. He had to be dead already, but his body just didn't know it.

In one desperate move, Dunk wrenched his body around. As he did, his helmet came off, and he realised that it was its leather strap he'd felt giving way. The cut on his neck burned, but the hope that it was only superficial surged in his heart.

The creature atop Dunk managed to maintain its position, even while the young thrower squirmed beneath

him. It glared down at him from behind a greasy-furred, rat-like snout poking out through the open face of its jet-black helmet. Its ebony eyes glittered with madness as glowing, green spittle dripped from its long, narrow muzzle filled with short, sharp teeth. Dunk recognised the spitting-mad beastman instantly: Mackey, the Chaos-mutated skaven who'd been taking cheap shots at him all day.

Throughout it all, Dunk had tried to tell himself it was nothing personal. Death and dismemberment was all part of the game. Maybe it wasn't legal by the rules, but people expected it. The fans, the coaches, the players, they all expected it.

Even the referees expected it. They didn't haul the killers off and throw them in jail. They just hit them with a penalty.

But when a blood-parched, mutant skaven sat on top of Dunk and drooled something green and viscous on to his face, where it stung and burned like fire, he had his doubts.

'Don't let them get to you, son.' Dunk's agent, a rotund halfling by the name of Slick Fullbelly, had said the same thing to him over and over. 'It's their job to try to put you down, just as it's yours to do the same to them. The trick is to do unto others before they do unto you. It's nothing personal, for you or them. Remember that.'

'This one's for Schlitzzy,' Mackey said as he raked down with his long, filth-caked claws. 'Say hi to him for me in hell!'

Faster than he could think, Dunk's hands snapped up and caught Mackey by the wrists. He held the skaven's arms out away from him, the tips of his talons only inches from Dunk's face.

The crowd booed, hissing at the All-Star. It was one thing to kill someone while the ball was in play. Watching mayhem like that happen was a good part of why most of the fans showed up to the games. The chance to be spattered with warm blood proved too much for them to pass up.

After a score, though, it was time for the gridiron warriors to return to their respective corners, to lick their wounds until it was time to face each other again. To violate that understanding

was more than just breaking the rules. Players chewed up the rulebook and spat it out during every game.

To try to kill someone during one of these few down moments, though, was known as a dead ball foul. Few fans would tolerate this worst kind of cheating. Not even the best-bribed referees could afford to ignore so flagrant a foul.

So the crowd cheered when Dunk sat up hard and bashed his forehead into Mackey's sneering mouth. He felt teeth snap and flesh shred in the skaven's mouth, and when he drew back, blood, mucous, and the creature's glowing saliva coated his own forehead.

Dunk tried to shove Mackey off, but the skaven snapped down at him instead, trying to savage him with its broken front teeth. To keep himself from the creature's reach, Dunk fell back again. When his head hit the Astrogranite, though, he knew he had nowhere else left to go.

Panicked, Dunk pressed up against Mackey again, trying to throw him off, but the skaven, mad with pain, refused to relent for a moment. He used his weight to press down against Dunk's arms, lowering his snapping, bloodied snout inch by inch toward Dunk's exposed neck.

Dunk tried to swing his legs up and throw the skaven over his head, but Mackey's legs clamped around his waist like iron bands. Those jaws of his kept getting lower and lower.

Mackey had Dunk's arms pressed hard against his chest now. The Hacker thrower tried to butt the skaven with his head again, but he couldn't get the momentum to do more than annoy the insane beast.

Mackey chortled at this, coughing and snorting up blood and mucous that dripped through his shattered teeth. He shoved his snout down at Dunk's neck, but the thrower managed to deflect the skaven's nose with his chin. Quick as a snake, Mackey forced his sopping-wet snout past Dunk's cheek and began to pry the Hacker's chin up with the end of his pointed nose.

'Stop it!' Dunk said, unable to think of anything else to do. Where were the referees when you needed them? Probably they didn't want to get involved in the middle of a mortal combat like this. It was one thing to give out a penalty to

someone who committed a foul. It was something else entirely to risk your life trying to get between two trained and armoured Blood Bowl players.

Mackey responded by snuffling its nostrils against the underside of Dunk's jawline.

'Hey!' Dunk shouted. 'Not on a first date!'

'Your blood.' Mackey growled softly into Dunk's ear. 'It smells delicious.'

At times like this, Dunk sometimes wished he was a praying man. He'd seen enough of the fickleness of the gods to know that using your last breath calling on them was a waste. Still, nothing else more useful came to mind either.

Dunk tried to think of something pithy, some last words that would sting his killer or at least give the world a reason to remember him. The jagged touch of the creature's teeth pressing down over his jugular vein, though, forced everything but blind panic from his head.

Dunk gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. As he did, he found images of Spinne Schönheit whirling through his mind. The beautiful catcher for the Reikland Reavers had only been dating him for a few months, but he already knew that he loved her with all his heart, that he wanted to marry her, to have kids, to grow old. Now none of that would happen – growing old, most of all.

Dunk felt Mackey spread his teeth, readying himself for the bite that would end Dunk's life. He felt the skaven's acidic drool burn its way around his throat as if preparing the way for the mortal wound.

His eyes still closed, Dunk felt Mackey's face draw back, and he stiffened for the final blow. Instead, he heard a sickening snap and felt Mackey's grip on him fall slack.

Dunk peeled one eye open and then the other to find a massive creature towering over him. He stood over eight feet tall and massed at least four hundred pounds, twice the size of Dunk. Polished tusks jutted from his lower jaw, and a golden ring the size of a bracelet hung like a doorknocker from the septum of his broken nose.

The ogre peered down at Dunk, Mackey's head in one hand and his body in the other, hot blood pouring from them both.

The crowd went nuts. The cheers were so loud Dunk wondered if his ears might bleed.

'Dunkel okay?' the ogre said, concern furrowing his massive brow as he let the separate parts of what had once been Mackey drop to the Astrogranite.

'I am now, big guy,' Dunk said as he took the ogre's hand and let the creature haul him to his feet. 'Thanks, M'Grash.'

As Dunk wiped Mackey's blood, snot, and spit from himself, a tall, thin orc in a black-and-white striped shirt ran up and threw something at M'Grash: a sack of sand wrapped in a long, yellow ribbon of cloth. It fluttered to the ground after bouncing off the ogre's chest.

'I don't believe it!' Bob's voice said over the PA. 'They're going to call a penalty on K'Thragsh!'

The crowd's cheers turned to boos. Dunk started to shout something at the referee, but the official just waved him off. Then the orc stood to face the announcer's box and crossed his arms in an X over his head. Then he pointed to M'Grash.

'Holy Nuffle's battered balls!' Bob said. 'It's a dead ball foul on M'Grash!'

'What's the penalty going to be?' asked Jim.

The ref pulled back his hand and then stabbed his finger to point out over the top rows of the stadium.

'He's kicking M'Grash K'Thragsh out of the game!'

'Oh, the crowd doesn't like this, Jim.'

Dunk put his hand on M'Grash's arm and felt the ogre flex his muscles. They were like steel.

The ref started to back-pedal as he watched M'Grash glare at him with his saucer-sized eyes. He put up his hands and flinched when the ogre snorted. The crowd went wild.

'Give! Him! To! Us!' the fans chanted. 'Give! Him! To! Us!'

The ref turned and sprinted away down the field.

'M'Grash,' Dunk said, trying to hold on to the ogre's arm. 'Don't do—'

Before he could finish, though, M'Grash tore free and lumbered after the fleeing ref with a stride twice as long as his prey's.

Dunk threw up his hands and decided to watch and enjoy the chase. 'They've already kicked him out of the game,' he said. 'What else can they do to him?'

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