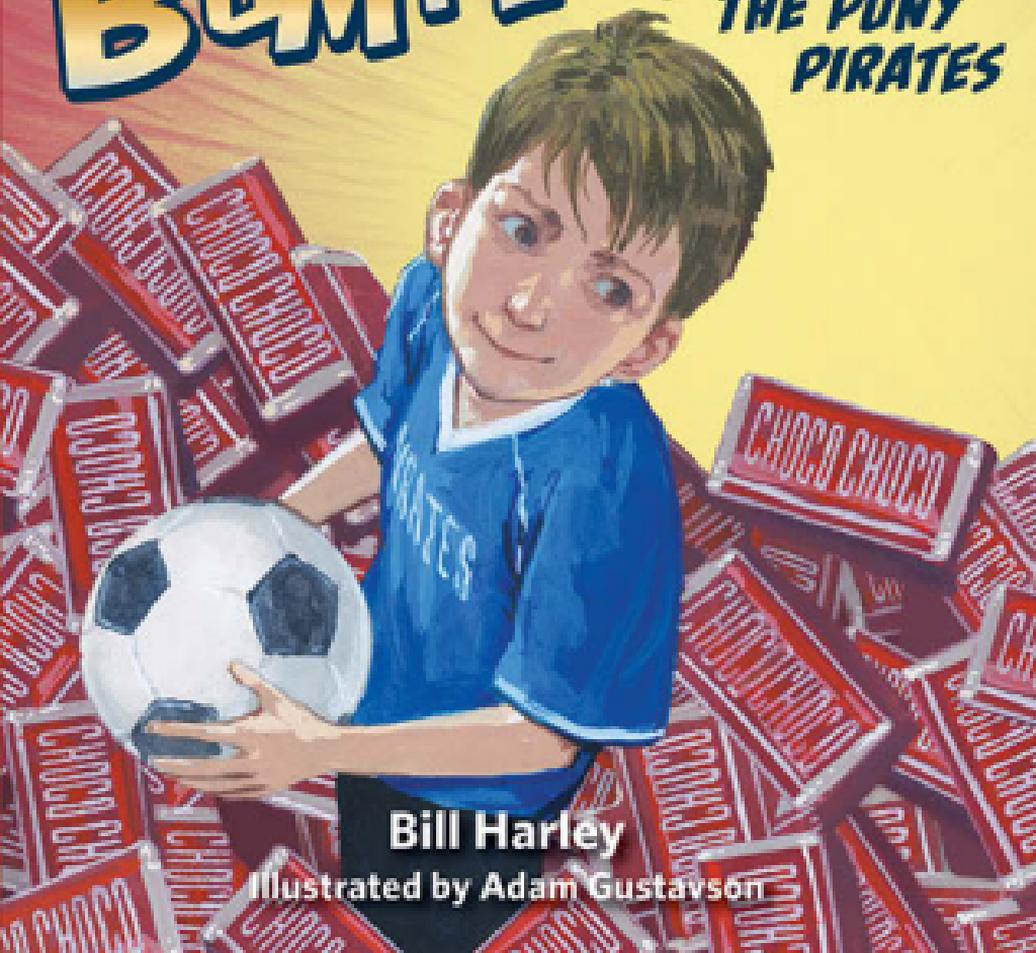


CHARLIE BUMPERS

vs.
*THE PUNY
PIRATES*



Bill Harley

Illustrated by Adam Gustavson

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BUMPERS vs.**

**THE
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To Noah and Dylan—
my inspirations 4 EVAR

Thanks again to my trusted reader Jane Murphy,
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Contents

1—The Pirates of Doom	1
2—It's Hard to Play Soccer without Running	7
3—A Big Blob of Plasma	14
4—A Human Zoo of Soccer	24
5—Traffic Jam	33
6—Boom-Boom	41
7—Chocolate Bars for Sale!	47
8—Pure Genius	59
9—Goooooaaal!	67
10—That's Why I Hate Him!	74
11—A Math Moron	82
12—Only Me to Stop It	89
13—My Brain! It's Exploding!	99
14—We're Going to Be Rich	103
15—BOOGERS!	111
16—Kicking Poison Soccer Balls at My Head	115
17—Waiting for a Lecture	122
18—How Do Parents Know This Stuff?	127
19—Arrrrrrrrr!	134

20—Right in the Rear End	141
21—Banana!	146
22—Not Going to Lose	158
23— <i>¡Qué horrible!</i>	164
24—Transformation	169

The Pirates of Doom

“Charlie Bumpers!” my mom yelled.

“What?” I turned back to the car to look at her. I was in a hurry to get to my first soccer practice with my new team, the Pirates.

“Your water bottle!” she called, holding it out of the car window.

I ran over, grabbed it, and turned to run. I didn’t want to be late!

“And your soccer ball,” she said.

I ran over and got that, too. “See you,” I said.

I turned back and ran.

“Wait!” she called again. “Dad will pick you,

Hector, and Tommy up at 5:30.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” she said.

“Thank you!” I yelled back over my shoulder.

I was eager to find my team. It was my first year in the ten-and-under league, and by some miracle, my two best friends, Hector Adélia and Tommy Kasten, were on my team. They were both excellent players. And my mom said that our coach, Mr. Carmody, had been a college soccer coach, so I figured he knew everything.

The Pirates were going to rule the soccer season. We would score a million goals.

Or at least fifty.

Even though we don’t keep score in this league.

At least the adults *say* they don’t keep score. They say they want us to have fun and work on our skills and not worry about winning and losing.

But I think they *do* keep score. I know I do.

It seemed like there were a thousand kids at the fields behind the high school, all searching for

their new teams. I wandered around looking for the Pirates. It was like trying to find one matching pair in a huge drawer of unmatched socks. There was a six-and-under league, an eight-and-under league, and a ten-and-under-league, and this was the first day of practice for all the teams. Finally I spotted Tommy and Hector, walking together.

“Hey, Tommy! Hector!” I yelled.

They both turned and waved.

I jogged over and greeted them with a double high five.

“This year is going to be awesome,” Tommy said.

“Can you believe we’re all on the same team?”

“The Pirates,” Hector said.

“More like the Proud Pirates!” Tommy said.

“The Proud *Punishing* Pirates,” I added.

“The three of us together,” Tommy said solemnly, raising his hand, “will be known as the Pirates of Doom. Arrrrr!”

“Stupific!” I said. “Stupific” is a word Tommy and I made up that means stupendous and terrific all mixed together.

“We’re on Field 4, over there,” Hector said, pointing to a far corner of the field. We trotted over. When we got there, we found some boys playing, but they looked really small.

“This can’t be our team,” said Tommy. “Maybe your dad got the number wrong, Hector.”

“I don’t think so,” Hector said. “He showed me the number on the letter they sent.”

“Hey, look, Charlie.” Tommy nodded toward one of the boys. “There’s Trevor. You know, that little guy from your class?”

“Trevor?”

I couldn’t believe it. Trevor never even played soccer at recess. What was he doing there?



We stared at the kids running around on the field. One was bouncing a soccer ball with his hand like he was on a basketball court. Another boy was holding a phone and looked like he was playing a game. One kid tried to kick the ball and tripped over it. Almost all of them seemed too small for our league. It didn't look like a soccer team. It looked more like a kindergarten gym class.

This couldn't be our team!

I tapped one of the boys on the shoulder. "Is this the Pirates?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said. "Did you guys just get here? You have to go check in with Mr. Carmody."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Over there," the boy said, pointing. "The guy with the yellow shirt."

I looked where he was pointing and saw a man standing on the side of the practice field, arms folded, watching everything that was going on.

He looked old. And wiry. He didn't look like a soccer coach. More like a granddad.

He was the coach? I looked at Tommy, then at Hector. They seemed as surprised as I was.

“Uh-oh,” I said. “This isn't what I had in mind.”

“Me neither,” Tommy grumbled.

Hector just shook his head.