Against the Odds

Desert Claw
Damien Lewis

Winner Takes All
John Francome
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The Vital Link

www.vitallink.org.uk
**Activity 1**

**Against the Odds**

| Purpose | ➔ To consider the power of the theme of individual or group achievement in engaging readers in a story.  
         | ➔ To reflect on the nature of team working and some gender questions it can raise. |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Resources | **Copies of Desert Claw**  
            | **Copies of Winner Takes All**  
            | Handouts 1 and 2: Book extracts  
            | Flipchart, pens |
| Activity | Writing is particularly powerful when it invites readers to identify with people who are faced with a goal to achieve. In fiction, overcoming apparently insurmountable barriers, by whatever means possible, in order to succeed in the end appeals enormously to those of us who are struggling with everyday issues. The reader is often in a position of advantage to some of the characters in the story, having explicit knowledge or picking up on clues provided by the writer. In non-fiction, reading about real-life issues involved in working towards goals can enable readers to see their own situation more clearly.  
The following activities will offer readers the opportunity to explore factors that contribute to the successful resolution of challenges in fictional plots.  
Using examples from their own experience and knowledge, as well as books and other media, use a flipchart and ask the group to brainstorm the factors that help people to achieve goals. These may be any sort of goal – personal, learning or work based – but they should be goals which readers themselves would like to achieve. Suggestions should include: |

*continued ➔*
Activity

- making a plan
- getting motivated
- having trusted ‘tools’ to do the job
- learning from the past: information on previous ways the goal has been achieved or was missed
- spotting the difficulties which might lie in the way
- identification of positive features that might help to achieve the goal
- support from others – individual or team
- previous experience

Now repeat the exercise, this time listing the factors that can inhibit or prevent the achievement of a goal. Suggestions might include:

- unrealistic timescales
- lack of motivation
- unexpected change in personal circumstances
- inaccurate information on the goal to be achieved
- the wrong ‘tools’ for the job
- the wrong goal but for the right reasons
- the right goal but for the wrong reasons
- loss of individual or team support
- insufficient information

Read through Handouts 1 and 2 with the group. From the extracts given, can they (i) make any predictions about what the goals to be achieved will be – explicit and implicit, and (ii) spot any of the factors they have previously identified that might feature strongly in either of the books as the characters try to achieve their goals?

Reflection

The books offer varying perspectives on achievement of goals and teamwork. The notion of who or what constitutes the team is fluid in *Winner Takes All*, and this is what contributes to its tension. The goal is apparently common – the winning of the race – but personal frictions and dubious ethics prevent the exploitation of individuals’ strengths that could contribute to an unbeatable racing team. In *Desert Claw* teamwork and camaraderie enable Mick’s group to achieve their goal, but they find that they are being deceived and that the larger ‘team’ to which they thought they belonged, and which justified their actions, does not exist.

continued ➔
### Reflection

Are any actions taken in the books that readers felt undermined their sympathy with the main characters, or did they understand the reasons for them even if not approving of them? Are any means justified in achieving a goal? Readers might like to discuss this point with reference to TV soaps, drama or real-life stories familiar to them.

What are the elements that need to be in place to make a good team function? Some suggestions might be:

- shared goals
- achievable goals
- motivation
- leadership
- clearly defined roles
- right mix of skills and talents
- planning
- good rapport within the team
- people who take on tasks and complete them
- clear decision making

Were any/all of these apparent in the books? Which characters work specifically to ensure that these elements are in place for their colleagues?

Are readers able to describe characters in the books whom they felt were exploited in some way by others who were intent on achieving their goal? Were those characters important to the story and, if so, to whom? Did readers sympathise with them – why, or why not?

### Development

There are two key female characters in *Winner Takes All*, one in *Hell Island* and none in *Desert Claw*.

Readers may like to consider the roles that the women characters are given in the development of plot in action novels, as these could be defined. Do their activities usually push the plot forward, or are they there to add glamour or love interest? In what ways do the women support the achievement of others’ goals (or set their own in *Winner Takes All*) and how successful are they?

Do readers feel that the presence of women in *Desert Claw* or *Hell Island* might have changed the nature of the books, and if so, how?
‘MICK, YOU’RE MISSION LEADER. You form a four man fire team, together with Eddie, Jim and Jock.’ The Major nodded at the three other men in the room. ‘On arrival in Baghdad, you hook up with Summit Security. Mick, I understand you know Bill Berger, the director of Summit? He’s been in Baghdad since the war. Runs a big security operation out there. He’s got you eight extra men, that’s two more fire teams. They’re all British and American ex-special forces. Gives you a dozen men to do the job, which should be more than enough, don’t you think?’ ‘Possibly,’ said Mick. ‘Yep. I s’pose so.’ ‘Show a little enthusiasm, won’t you, Mick?’ said the Major. ‘Oh yes, I almost forgot. The codename for your mission is Desert Claw. I repeat, Desert Claw.’

Five years ago Mick had left the SAS, after fifteen years in the regiment. Since then he’d worked as a photographer in his native Sheffield. Outside of the military, photography was his main passion in life. But he hadn’t made much money at it. So he’d agreed to be kept ‘in reserve’ as an old SAS hand to be called in when certain missions were required. The so-called ‘black operations’. High risk. High danger. Top secret. And highly paid. Like now, with this crazy mission to rescue some dodgy painting in Iraq.
The meeting with the Major was being held in Hereford, but not at the regular SAS base. The Major had rented a room in some cheap hotel. It seemed a bit odd to Mick. But he presumed it was all part of the ‘black’ nature of the mission. Keeping it all unofficial and away from British government territory. Mick glanced around the small, shabby hotel room. Luckily, he had his old team with him. Perched on the bed was his right-hand man, ‘East End’ Eddie. An old SAS hand, Eddie came from the rough end of London. He looked like your average football hooligan, with a shaven head and a barrel chest. He was hard as nails and sharp as a pin. Next to him was ‘Kiwi’ Jim, a veteran of the New Zealand SAS. Kiwi Jim was lanky and lean, and a killer at unarmed combat. He was a real joker and a good, honest soldier. He was known to his mates as ‘the Kiwi’. On the far side was Matt ‘Jock’ McLane, a massive Scot with a shock of unruly red hair. Also ex-SAS, Matt was a man of few words and a fearless warrior. Jock, the Kiwi and Eddie were also ‘reserves’ like Mick. They were his A-team. They’d been on several black missions together. Without his A-team behind him, Mick would never have considered the present mission.
FOUR YEARS IS A LONG TIME in the life of a racehorse – and in the life of a marriage. Four years ago, Ben had accompanied Alan Marcus and his wife to Ireland. As ever, Alan was searching for a new horse to add to his string and Ben’s job was to advise him. He knew what Alan was looking for – a young horse with the potential to make a top-class steeple-chaser. One who could win a Gold Cup.

Ben had been on buying trips with Alan before but this was Christina’s first time. The pair had been married for less than a year.

They flew to Shannon airport on the west coast and based themselves in a hotel ten minutes from Limerick City. There was no shortage of horses to look at. Everyone in Ireland, from the taxi-driver to the local postman, had an animal tucked away in a corner of a muddy field. And, funnily enough, all of these horses had the potential to become champions – according to their owners, at any rate. After three days of gazing at hopeless beasts, Ben was finding it hard to maintain his enthusiasm. The rain didn’t help, nor the fact that Alan appeared to blame him personally for their failure. Only Christina seemed unaffected. Though she didn’t say much, she always found something to like about the inadequate animals paraded before them.

On their last afternoon they finally found what they were looking for. As if on cue, the sun came out.

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'That big fellow there,' announced Alan as they looked into a paddock containing half-a dozen frisky three-year-olds. 'He's the one I want.'

Ben had to give it to Alan. He had an eye for a horse all right, though he was inclined to be impulsive. The animal in question was a handsome creature. Even half-caked in mud he looked a picture of health, an athletic sort with a bold eye. He seemed older than the others, not just in looks but in behaviour.

A bale of hay had been cut open so all the horses could get at it. The black horse was keen to eat but not, it seemed, to share. When his companions lowered their heads to the hay, he shouldered them away.

Alan laughed. 'That's right, boy, you show 'em who's boss.'

'He's just a big bully,' said Christina.

Ben was surprised to hear her raise a note of dissent. It was the first time she'd disagreed with her husband in his hearing. Alan turned to face her. 'You don't get anywhere in this world by being soft, sweetheart. That black one's a winner, the rest are also-rans as far as I'm concerned.'

As if to prove his point, the big horse charged at one of the others, his ears pinned back in fury as he chased his rival away from the food.

'There's more than one way to get what you want,' said Christina. 'Look at that one with the white face.'

A small chestnut was pulling happily at the hay while the black horse shooed the other animal off in a different direction.

'See,' she continued, 'that one gets to eat without having to throw his weight around. That's much more sensible, don't you think, Ben?'

The question took Ben by surprise. He didn't fancy getting caught between husband and wife.
But Alan wasn’t letting him off the hook. ‘Come on, Ben. Give us the benefit of your expensive opinion. Which one of those is most likely to win a race for me?’

It was a daft question, really. Ben knew that picking horses out in a field was like stepping into a classroom of children and selecting the bright ones on looks. In the end, successful horses were those with the talent and the heart to win. Neither quality was visible on the surface.

However, he’d had a quiet word with the breeder earlier. He was impressed by the pedigree of the two horses they were looking at. ‘I’m with you on the black one,’ he said to Alan. ‘He’s got a strong frame and he’s aggressive. Those are great qualities in a racehorse.’

Alan grinned smugly at his wife. ‘You see. I told you that was the horse to buy.’

It was the first time Ben really noticed the delicate pale blue of Christina’s eyes. They were turned on him now, brimming with resentment.

But Ben hadn’t finished. ‘Christina’s right about the other horse though. He’s got a brain in his head and a clever horse can always find his way over a fence. Just because he looks cute doesn’t mean he’s not tough as well.’

‘He’s too damn small,’ objected Alan. Ben nodded. ‘At the moment maybe. I reckon he’ll be plenty big enough when he’s filled out properly.’

‘What are you saying?’ Alan growled. ‘That I should buy the brown one not the black?’

Ben was considering his reply when Christina slipped her arm around her husband’s waist. ‘No, darling. What he’s saying is that you should buy them both – one for you and one for me.’

And, to Ben’s astonishment, that’s exactly what Alan did. Within a month, Devil Moon and Smokescreen, the bullying black horse and the white-faced chestnut, had started their lives in training in Ben’s yard.
Further development

In many stories, although the main theme may be about achieving a goal through teamwork, the resolution is finally brought about by the actions of specific individuals within the team working alone. Ask readers if they can identify such situations from a variety of texts and media familiar to them (films, TV, graphic serials). This activity can be extended to discussion of the role of the ‘lone ranger’ in fiction and the contrast between the motivation often given for these characters’ achievement of goals as compared with team achievement.

Bruce Tuckman, the educational psychologist, identified several stages in the development of a team: forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning. Can readers identify any points in their lives when they have had to become part of a team (possibly including joining their class or a new reading group)? How were the stages exhibited by the behaviour of the group? Do things always happen in that order – what might make a difference?

Useful websites

http://observer.guardian.co.uk/osm/story/0,6903,1053338,00.html
interview with John Francome

http://www.swindonweb.com/guid/peopfran0.htm
article about John Francome

www.racehorsetrainers.org website of the National Trainers Association, the professional body for licensed racehorse trainers in the UK

Links to individual author websites can be found with the author biographies in the file ‘Further Approaches to Reading for Pleasure’, and with the individual book files for the relevant March Quick Reads.
Other **Quick** Reads with a theme of teamwork/goal achievement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hell Island</td>
<td>Matthew Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How To Change Your Life in 7 Steps</td>
<td>John Bird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screw It, Let’s Do It</td>
<td>Richard Branson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Team</td>
<td>Mick Dennis</td>
</tr>
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Other books with ‘teamwork’ theme from the First Choice database:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>ISBN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In High Germany</td>
<td>Dermot Bolger</td>
<td>1902602145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Cup Diary</td>
<td>Niall Quinn</td>
<td>1904301487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mad Weekend</td>
<td>Roddy Doyle</td>
<td>1905494041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning Through</td>
<td>Brian Irvine</td>
<td>1905207050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My World</td>
<td>Jonnie Wilkinson</td>
<td>0747242763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are We There Yet</td>
<td>Robert Caprio</td>
<td>074349041X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The David Beckham Story</td>
<td>Ed Greene</td>
<td>1844427706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a Games Person</td>
<td>Julie Myerson</td>
<td>0224073990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### March title
- The Thief
- Woman Walks into a Bar
- Blackwater
- Star Sullivan
- Hell Island
- The Book Boy
- Don’t Make Me Laugh
- Someone Like Me
- Screw It, Let’s Do It
- How to Change Your Life in 7 Steps
- Chickenfeed
- The Team

### Author
- Ruth Rendell
- Rowan Coleman
- Conn Iggulden
- Maeve Binchy
- Matthew Reilly
- Joanna Trollope
- Patrick Augustus
- Tom Holt
- Richard Branson
- John Bird
- Minette Walters
- Mick Dennis with the Premier League

### ISBN
- 0091796865
- 0099492288
- 0091907039
- 0752879545
- 0330442325
- 0747582114
- 1902934466
- 1841494461
- 0753510995
- 0091907039
- 0330440314
- 0552153729

### May title
- Danny Wallace and the Centre of the Universe
- Desert Claw
- Cleanskin
- The Name You Once Gave Me
- Grey Man
- I Am a Dalek
- The Poison in the Blood
- I Love Football
- Winner Takes All
- The Dying Wish
- Secrets
- The Corpse’s Tale

### Author
- Danny Wallace
- Damien Lewis
- Val McDermid
- Mike Phillips
- Andy McNab
- Gareth Roberts/Dr Who
- Tom Holland
- Hunter Davies
- John Francome
- Courtttia Newland
- Lynne Barrett-Lee
- Katherine John

### ISBN
- 0091908949
- 0099493535
- 0007216726
- 0007216718
- 0552154334
- 0563486481
- 0349119643
- 0755314700
- 0755329481
- 0349119635
- 1905170300
- 1905170319
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Audio versions of the Quick Reads are available from W F Howes Ltd as part of their Clipper Emergent Reader programmes (www.wfhowes.co.uk/cerp/).

See First Choice library booklist at www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk for mainstream books selected against criteria for their suitability for emergent readers.

Other publications for emergent readers include those from Sandstone Press (www.sandstonepress.com) and New Island’s Open Door series (www.newisland.ie).
Adult Literacy Core Curriculum References

Activity 1

Activity, Reflection and Development

Reading
Rt/E3.1,.2, .4, .7, .8
Rt/L1.1–.3, .5

Speaking and listening
SLc/E3.1–.4
SLc/L1.1–.4
SLd/E3.1–.3
SLd/L1.1–.3
Wt/E3.1
Wt/L1.1