The stories in this collection are prizewinning entries in the Category Sports Stories in the Competition of Writers of Children's Books organized by Children's BookTrust.

EDITED BY GEETA MENON

Illustrated by Subir Roy

Text typeset in 13/16 pt. New Century School Book

© by CBT 2006
ISBN 81-89750-05-4

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in whole or in part, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by Children's Book Trust, Nehru House, 4 Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi-110002 and printed at its Indraprastha Press. Ph: 23316970-74 Fax: 23721090 e-mail: cbtnd@vsnl.com Website: www.childrensbooktrust.com
CONTENTS

The Fighter  5
Ramendra Kumar
The Race  11
Nisha Punjabi
That Boy Next Door  16
Cheryl Rao
A Deserving Substitute  22
Debashish Majumdar
The Worth Of A Skill  29
Manoj T. Thomas
Beating The Odds  35
Ramendra Kumar
A Race Lost And Won  42
Devika Rangachari
Think To Win  48
Lata Kaku
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sportsman Spirit</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ramendra Kumar</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Girl In The Team</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Meenakshi G. Jain</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race The Clock</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Cheryl Rao</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mind Games</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Debashish Majumdar</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Chance</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>M.S. Mahadevan</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Goal Not Scored</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Manoj T. Thomas</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing For Pride</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ramendra Kumar</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"I think the idea is great," said Rahul.
"And I think it is dumb," snapped Imran.

Rahul felt anger slowly rising up, but he controlled himself.

The meeting of the Nagarjuna Public School (NPS) junior cricket team was in progress. The final match of the Inter-School Junior Cricket Tournament for the Regal Trophy was to be played the next day at the NPS grounds. And the NPS would be facing the Vivekananda High School (VHS) in the final.

Imran was the captain of the NPS team. He and the coach, M.S. Reddy, had called the team members to finalize the strategy for the next day's match. To discuss the arrangements for the proposed match, the coach had gone to the Principal's room for a few minutes. Imran and Rahul were having an argument over who should open the innings. Rahul wanted their regular opener Greg to go two-down.

"Imran, the VHS has the best pace attack in the city. Both Krishna and Manjit are very quick and accurate. Greg is our best batsman. We can't take the risk of sending him to open the innings. God forbid, if he gets out cheap then we are doomed," Ranul said apprehensively.

"Come on, Rahul, Greg will make mincemeat of those two clowns." Imran was firm. "I have decided Greg will open, and
that is final. Now, come up with some better ideas on how to tackle the opposition."

"I think my idea of sending Greg two-down was great," insisted Rahul.

"And I still think it was dumb," Imran voiced.

Seeing the tension in the air, Badal, the wicketkeeper said, "What about the toss? In case we win, should we bat or field?"

"I feel we should field." That was Imran.

"No, I don't think you are right," said Rahul. "We are not very good at chasing. I feel we should bat first, try to put up a good score and then attempt to bowl them out."

"You are very defensive, Rahul," Imran said with a smirk. "If I win the toss, I will put them in. I love chasing."

"But..." Rahul protested.

"No buts. Don't forget, Rahul, I am the captain and you are not even in the playing eleven. You are the twelfth man, remember?" Imran taunted him.

Rahul's face turned red and he walked out of the room.

The next day, Srinivas, the best all-rounder of the team, did not report. He had sprained his ankle and was out of action.

James, the rival captain, won the toss and elected to field. It was a thirty-over match. Greg and Sadiq opened the innings. In the very second over both were out. Imran, who went one-down, held one end up as wickets tumbled at the other end at regular intervals.

Rahul came into bat when the score was 97 for seven in 23 overs. Imran was playing on a well-made 43. Two overs later, Imran, then at 49, drove the ball to mid-off and took off. In his hurry to reach the landmark of fifty, he did not realize that the fielder at mid-on had dived and brought off a great save.

Rahul, realizing that the run was suicidal, yelled, "No!"

But by then Imran was halfway down the pitch. As he turned, he looked back and saw the fielder who signalized that he was safe.

"Rahul, also an all-rounder, was the automatic replacement. Rahul, also an all-rounder, was the automatic replacement.

James, the rival captain, won the toss and elected to field. It was a thirty-over match. Greg and Sadiq opened the innings. The next day, Srinivas, the best all-rounder of the team, did not report. He had sprained his ankle and was out of action.

Rahul, also an all-rounder, was the automatic replacement. Rahul, also an all-rounder, was the automatic replacement.

James, the rival captain, won the toss and elected to field. It was a thirty-over match. Greg and Sadiq opened the innings. In the very second over both were out. Imran, who went one-down, held one end up as wickets tumbled at the other end at regular intervals.

Rahul came into bat when the score was 97 for seven in 23 overs. Imran was playing on a well-made 43. Two overs later, Imran, then at 49, drove the ball to mid-off and took off. In his hurry to reach the landmark of fifty, he did not realize that the fielder at mid-on had dived and brought off a great save.

Rahul, realizing that the run was suicidal, yelled, "No!"

But by then Imran was halfway down the pitch. As he turned, he looked back and saw the fielder who signaled that he was safe.

While Imran was still watching, Rahul said, "Rahul, also an all-rounder, was the automatic replacement. Rahul, also an all-rounder, was the automatic replacement.

James, the rival captain, won the toss and elected to field. It was a thirty-over match. Greg and Sadiq opened the innings. In the very second over both were out. Imran, who went one-down, held one end up as wickets tumbled at the other end at regular intervals.

Rahul came into bat when the score was 97 for seven in 23 overs. Imran was playing on a well-made 43. Two overs later, Imran, then at 49, drove the ball to mid-off and took off. In his hurry to reach the landmark of fifty, he did not realize that the fielder at mid-on had dived and brought off a great save.

Rahul, realizing that the run was suicidal, yelled, "No!"

But by then Imran was halfway down the pitch. As he turned, he looked back and saw the fielder who signaled that he was safe.
turned, the VHS wicketkeeper had whipped the bails off.

While walking back to the pavilion, Imran glared at Rahul who simply shrugged.

Rahul too followed Imran in the next over and the NPS team was bundled out for 123 in the 26th over.

During lunch, Imran confronted Rahul. "Listen, I know you are trying to take spite on me because of the argument we had yesterday. But remember it is the team which comes first."

Rahul was shocked. He could not imagine Imran even thinking that he would get him out on purpose.

Rahul had a reason to feel hurt. The whole school knew what a fighter Rahul was. In fact, he was called the Robin Singh of the NPS. Like Robin Singh, Rahul bowled medium pace, batted in the middle order and was a brilliant fielder. He was not hugely talented. He rarely sparkled in the field with huge scores or achieved sensational breakthroughs with his bowling. But when the chips were down he was ever ready to contribute his might either with the bat or with the ball and more often than not in the field. He was a fighter in the true sense of the word.

Rahul was stung by Imran's remarks but he did not react. He decided that he would let his performance on the field do the talking.

The VHS team started cautiously but was soon cruising along. At the halfway stage, they were 83 for three.

It was then that Venkat and Vishnu, the 'spin-twins' of the NPS struck. Within eight overs they had the rival team reeling at 108 for eight in 28 overs. The VHS had to score 16 runs in two overs with two wickets in hand. The 'danger man', James, was still at the crease on a steady 34.

Rahul had not been brought on. Imran now gave him the ball without a word. His first three deliveries were bang on target and James could not put them away. The home crowd cheered every such ball. Rahul now got a little overconfident.
He decided he would try to get James out. He bowled a yorker, a ball which he bowled rarely but always with great results.

James was an experienced player with a good temperament and powerful shoulders. He read the delivery perfectly and stepped out to hoist it over long-on for a huge six.

There was a hush in the entire stadium. The crowd was stunned. Rahul's next ball was not a loose one but James, inspired by the glorious six, stepped back and cracked it to the square-leg boundary for a four. On the last ball, James took a single and retained the strike.

The NPS supporters could not believe this. Rahul had squandered all the good work done by the twins and the rest of the team. In one over he had given away eleven runs. The equation now was clearly in favour of the VHS: five runs to get in the last over with two wickets in hand and most important of all, James was on strike.

Rahul was shattered. He walked off to his place in the square-leg boundary cursing himself for his overconfidence.

Ranga, the strike bowler of the NPS, was given the final over. James played the first ball to covers and scampered for a single. Manjit, whose skills with the bat were nothing great, could not score off the next two. The fourth ball he managed to take a cheeky single. The fifth delivery did not concede any runs. Now James had to score three runs off the last ball to clinch the Regal Trophy for his team.

The whole stadium was tense. Even the normally cool James was sweating. As Ranga turned and began his run-up, Rahul was praying hard. He knew if they lost the match it would be to a large extent because of his foolishness.

Ranga bowled the last ball and James stepped out and gave a massive heave. The ball took off like a rocket and headed straight for the square-leg boundary. Rahul saw the ball coming. It looked like it would fall short. He sprinted ahead and dived. As he dived, he saw a sharp stone that was jutting
out of the ground. He had to make a choice—he could either catch the ball and face the risk of landing on the stone, or avoid the stone and miss the catch.

Rahul dived headlong and smack! The ball landed in his hands. The next moment he felt a sharp pain...and passed out.

When Rahul opened his eyes, he saw a sea of faces staring at him, all anxious, worried and excited.

"Hey, Rahul! Are you okay?" It was Ranga.

"Can you get up?" the coach was asking him, concern writ large on his face.

"The bruise must be paining," Greg was saying.

"Boys, please leave him. Let him get some fresh air," he heard the authoritative voice of Dr. Acharya.

"Wha...what happened? Di...did I take the catch?" Rahul managed to ask.

"Of course, you did."

"What a catch it was!"

"Spectacular!"

"The best I have seen!"

"Even the original Robin Singh would have been proud!"

"It won us the match, man!"

The voices were drowning each other.

"We won! Really?" Rahul exclaimed.

"Yes, we did, Fighter, thanks to you."

Rahul looked up. He had not even noticed that his head was in Imran's lap.

"How do you feel, buddy?" Imran asked.

"We won the match, how else will I be feeling except great!"

"That is the spirit, man," drawled Ranga.

"Rahul will be okay. The cut is not deep. I have taken care of that. There is nothing to worry. A couple of painkillers and he will be fighting fit," Dr. Acharya said.

"Yes, I am sure of that. After all, he is our best fighter," Imran said and everyone cheered.
Tarun was a mediocre student. His grades could barely satisfy his parents. And, he was not a good singer, dancer, painter or even an actor. He always thought of himself as the black sheep of the family. His elder brother, who was pursuing a degree in engineering from a reputed college always made the family proud. But Tarun was never good at anything like that.

However, he was blessed with the strength of a great athlete; he was an excellent runner. He would run for hours be it day or night. Whenever he felt sad and lonely, he exhausted himself by running, thus releasing all his pent-up emotions. At times he would miss his school bus and would then run to the school, which was five miles away from his home! He just had one dream—to become the fastest runner in the world. Tarun did not know how to achieve his dream. On one hand, his parents hated his running and wanted him to concentrate more on his studies, which he never did. On the other hand, he belonged to a middle class family, and Tarun knew that to achieve his dream, he needed an intensive training, the amount for which was well beyond his family's reach.

When Tarun failed in his terminal examinations, his father was very angry with him. His friends too made fun of him.
It was a day he wanted to erase from his life and so he took to running. He ran all around the park. The sun beat down to check his rage but nothing could stop Tarun. After about an hour, he was fully exhausted and his fury having subsided, he threw himself on a bench and started to pant.

Suddenly he heard a voice. "What is it, son?"

Tarun looked to his left and there sat a man of about sixty. "I failed in two subjects," Tarun replied in a depressing tone.

The man smiled sympathetically and said, "Life is full of ups and downs, boy. By the way, I am Ram Narayan, and you are one of the best runners I have ever seen."

"Ram Narayan? Raaaa...m...Narayan! Are you the same Ram Narayan who won an Olympic medal in the 400-metre race in the 1960s?" Tarun could not hide his excitement.

"Yes," pat came the reply. Tarun was dazzled.

"Son, I have been watching you for the past 45 minutes," continued Ram Narayan, "and, I see a good future in you."

Tarun could not help but blush.

"All you need to do is keep that passion burning in you and never give up. Have you joined some training school?"

Tarun's smile turned to distraught. "A training school is very expensive, Sir, and I am unemployed," said Tarun feeling happy that he could joke even in these circumstances.

But Ram Narayan seemed pretty serious, "I can train you if you want, but I have one condition."

"What condition?" Tarun's voice showed a sense of urgency.

"There is a race on the Children's Day at the Nehru Stadium. Children of your age are competing there. If you win that race, I will start training you," said Ram Narayan.

"That is no big deal," thought Tarun. "I will, I will, Sir!" he heard himself saying with complete conviction.

"Fine, boy! It is my job to get you entry in the race and remember, yours to win it. Tell me, what is your name?" asked Ram Narayan.
"Tarun... Tarun Kapoor, Sir."

"Tarun, I will meet you here after five days to give you your participation card. All the best," said Ram Narayan and left. The next day brought a new ray of hope. Tarun got up early, had milk and before his mother could finish her query on what he was up to, he ran out and went to the Nehru Stadium to check the details of the race. He was very happy indeed.

Tarun started practising with zeal. Every day he would get up at four in the morning and run ten miles. In the evenings, he would time himself according to the 1,000-metre distance prescribed by the competition. He wanted everything to be perfect. He also wanted someone to back him up and so he told his mother everything.

Tarun practised vigorously for five days, and then met Ram Narayan to collect his participation card. Tarun gazed at the piece of paper which meant so much to him. No matter what, he had to win this race. He wanted to show his father that he was not really the black sheep of the family and that, he could be good at something at least.

The came November 14. After taking the blessings of his mother, Tarun pedalled away to the stadium. There was a huge crowd waiting to go inside. Tarun entered the office where a signboard read 'Participants only' with his heart beating faster every second. Inside, there were about fifty participants waiting for the race to begin.

Someone patted him on the shoulders. "Hello, Tarun!" It was Ram Narayan. "All the best!" he said affectionately.

Tarun smiled at him but did not say a word.

All the participants lined up, each one hoping to win the race. Each one of them had his family and friends on the stands to cheer for them. To his amazement, Tarun saw his mother in the stands. The fear in his eyes changed into confidence.

The whistle blew and all the participants started off with all their might. They were all determined to be the winner of the
race. In the lead was the fastest of them all, Tarun. Seeing himself ahead of everybody, Tarun felt very proud of himself.

On the track there was a shallow path. As he was running fast, Tarun did not notice that and he slipped. Breathing fast, he saw the other kids going past him. He could not be a loser today, and so without wasting a second, he got up to run once more. Being quick, Tarun overtook a few kids ahead of him. But as fate had it, he slipped once again.

What was happening to him? He could not bear it. He looked into the crowd and saw his mother. She was saying something to him: 'Get up, son, get up and run.'

So Tarun got up once again. He was among the last few. But he did not give up. Once more he overtook some children. Since he was fretting a little too much, he fell a third time!

Tears were rolling down his cheeks. How will he get into Ram Narayan's training now? How will he prove to his parents that he was talented? He was the last kid on the track now.

He turned his eyes towards the stands. Then he heard Ram Narayan screaming from somewhere, "Come on, Tarun, run!" And so he got up a third time. This twelve-year-old determined boy, who was last on the track, got up and ran with all the strength he had.

The crowd was cheering for Pawan, the boy who had won the race. But to Tarun's surprise, there was a louder applause when he crossed the finishing line last. The audience cheered for his determination and his valour for never giving up.

He bowed his head with shame and said to Ram Narayan, "I am sorry, Sir, I lost."

"No, son, to me you have won the toughest race, the race of your life. You got up and started afresh each time you fell. You are a real-life hero. Your training starts tomorrow."

Tarun could not believe his ears. Tears filled his eyes again. He smiled at his mother who hugged him and said, "You are the best son in the world!"
That Boy Next door
Cheryl Rao

Ashish hated Dev at first sight right from the moment he shifted next door during the Dussehra holidays. Ashish had been peeping over the wall, watching all the activity as furniture and boxes were carted into the neighbouring house. It was a long time before he looked up and saw a boy of about his age sitting up in a tree on the other side, peering at him!

The next thing he knew, there was a lot of hammering, nailing and tying on that same tree and soon, a tree house that was light years ahead of his own three planks on the banyan tree was staring him in the face. For years, he had played happily on his crude platform, making-believe it was Tarzan's home in the jungle but now he no longer wanted to swing from the tree onto the ground screaming, "Yee-agh!" because he knew that the new boy would be watching. He would be watching and laughing too!

Ashish took out his cycle and rode on to the driveway and down to the end of the road, stopping at the corner shop to buy a packet of chewing gum. He was returning home, pedalling and humming, when he saw the boy on the tree house staring at him.

The next evening, when he cycled down the road, something whizzed past him. He stopped and stared. It was none other
than the boy next door on a brand new racing bike with gears, just like the one Ashish had been admiring in the shops and had planned to ask his parents for his birthday.

Somehow, he had managed to avoid accompanying his mother to the neighbour's house when she had gone to welcome them to the colony.

"Their son's name is Dev and he is just about your age," she had said to Ashish. "You must call him to play with you."

However, each time she reminded him, he hurriedly began a new "homework assignment" and avoided meeting up with Dev. 'Once school reopens, Ma won't keep on at me to make friends with him,' he thought, praying for the holidays to end soon.

At last, he was back in school, the monitor of the class, feeling very important because he had done really well in his quarterly exams with the highest marks in almost every subject. Then, there he was like a nightmare in broad daylight—Dev, from next door! Right next to him in class! The new boy, who had come in the middle of the year and, according to the teacher, needed everyone to help him catch up with the work! Well, Ashish for one would not be doing any helping!

A couple of weeks went by and it seemed that Dev had certainly "Seen hard at work, for he was getting full marks in most of the tests and always seemed to know the answers in class when the teacher quizzed them. Ashish began to feel threatened. Especially since, slowly, Dev seemed to be making a lot of friends, and whenever Ashish peeped over the wall, he could see one or two of his classmates dropping in at Dev's house.

"Time for your projects," announced Mrs. Rao, the History teacher. "Choose any period in history, any country, not necessarily what we are doing this year, and be ready to make a presentation to the class."

Mrs. Rao divided the class into six groups and gave them
a fortnight to complete their work. Ashish was excited because he loved History.

"Let us make something really big this time," he said to the others in his group.

But his team member, Divya, cautioned him. "Let us not go overboard, Ashish, because if we get too ambitious, we won't be able to finish within the allotted time."

However, Ashish did not pay attention. All he wanted was that his group should do better than Dev's. But when the projects arrived in school, everyone was left open-mouthed. Dev's group had made a model of the Great Bath of Mohenjodaro and had stuck small shards of pottery on cardboard and written about each item.

Too late, Ashish realized that Dev had come from Rajasthan and had mentioned visiting Kalibangan and other archaeological sites.

Ashish claimed it was an accident, but very few children in the class believed it. Dev had his back to Ashish, who was standing with some of his friends. Divya took hold of the file they had prepared and walked towards the teacher. Ashish reached out to grab it from her and lost his balance. He fell heavily against her and his weight sent Divya flying on top of Dev. The model that was in his hands fell and shattered, and the teacher had not even seen it!

There was a stunned silence followed by an uproar. Dev did not think twice. He just lunged at Ashish and the two of them sprawled on the floor taking out on each other the anger and frustration of many months of rivalry—until at last Mrs. Rao separated them.

The teachers could not help but notice the sparks of anger in the eyes of the two boys. It was clear that the two were trying to be better than the other. When the time came for selections for the football and basketball teams, both Ashish and Dev were keen competitors.
Mr. Shamsher, the new games master, had been watching the children play inter-house matches for weeks and when he called out the names of each team, Dev and Ashish found to their horror that they were both selected for the football team!

"No, Sir," protested Ashish and Dev simultaneously.

Mr. Shamsher glared at them. "Then you can stay out of the team," he snapped, turning around and dismissing the others. "See that you are here every morning one hour before assembly."

"Please, Sir," Ashish and Dev said hastily. "We will also be here for practice."

The others left the field murmuring among themselves. "We won't be playing, but just separating the two of them whenever they fight, you know how they are."

"Why does Shamsher Sir want them together? Does he not know what trouble they will create?"

Daily practice was a nightmare until Mr. Shamsher reached the field, and made sure that there were no fights.

When the first inter-school match had to be played against St. Mark's, everyone was tense. "Boys, remember who your opponents are," Mr. Shamsher said as they went onto the field. "Play fair, but play to win!"

Somehow that did not seem to get into Ashish and Dev. Their enmity was so bitter that nothing seemed more important than being one up on each other. All Mr. Shamsher's coaching (and punishments!) had not worked. By half-time, the school team was trailing 2-0.

"I don't know why we even need to play," muttered one of the players from the visiting team. "Those two hoggers of the ball can lose just by being on the field!"

Ashish overheard and felt a pang. Their school would soon be the laughing stock of the town. He went over to Dev. "We need to cooperate," he said. "Together we can lick these guys."

Dev's eyes widened, but he did not argue. Just having Ashish
talk to him was a major turnaround. 'I can do my bit as well; I guess,' he thought, and listened as Ashish spoke calmly to him.

When they went back to the field, it seemed as though a magic wand had been waved. With a fresh burst of energy, which this time was productive, the two boys passed the ball to each other and their teammates with ease and soon were able to even the score. There were three minutes of play left when Ashish managed to get the ball and he set off across the field.

"Here!" yelled Dev, and Ashish saw that the field was clear ahead of him but there were two St. Mark's boys breathing down his neck. Quickly, he kicked, and to his relief, his aim was true. Dev stopped the ball and ran with it towards the goal.

His teammates yelled to him, "Kick!" and he did, the ball going straight over the goalkeeper's head and into the net just a few seconds before the bell rang to mark the end of the match.

There was an uproar from the spectators. Dev was thrilled. He put his hands up in the air and jumped around madly, savouring the crowd's approval. His teammates rushed to him and actually dropped him down on the ground in their excitement and enthusiasm.

But the sweetest and the most exciting moment came a few seconds later. Ashish walked up to him and clapped him on the back, shouting, "Hey, that was great! You saved the school!"

The other boys moved away warily, wondering what would come next. However, Dev laughed excitedly and said, "I could not have done it without that great pass you sent me!"

The two boys went towards Mr. Shamsher who was grinning from ear to ear and looking quite unlike his usual stern self. He opened his arms and hugged the boys, "It pays to be on the same team, doesn't it?" he asked.
The players hurriedly changed into their zebra-striped jerseys. Tony, their games master, blew the whistle. The players closed in around him like the petals of a flower.

"What you guys lack is confidence," he barked at his boys. "Play like cheetahs, not like mice."

Abdul felt dejected. Deepak looked at Sandy's face. Chang drooped his head shamefully. They all wanted to forget their performance in the tournament that had just ended.

"I am afraid that if our flagship striker Krishna fails to click, I will be forced to bring in a substitute," Tony chimed. He cast a dirty look at Sanjay who had failed to score.

Tony has been coaching the Sacred Meadows School football team for nearly four months now. He had discovered raw talent in Adil. great potential in Suresh and had pinned his hopes on Wasim. In the league matches, the school team had barely managed to crawl into the semi-final. In fact, they were on the brink of disaster in their last match. They had moved into the last four when their opposition had netted in a self-goal.

"I expect a well-balanced game," Tony shared his thoughts, "the mentally tougher side will win."

The Roseland High School had a formidable team. In their ranks was Dipender Singh who was on a sports scholarship.
And their goalkeeper Andrew was nicknamed 'The Rock' after the famous Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel song.

As the players took to the field, Tony waved them luck. And the substitutes took the bench at the players' gallery.

Isolated from the rest of the bunch was Eric D'Souza. He had a strong but slender frame. He had specialized as a left centre forward. He was very agile on the run. Honestly, Eric did not deserve to sit out as a substitute.

Tony would have liked Eric to play in the starting line-up but... Mr. Rajiv Kumar was a very important businessman of the town. He had not only donated a hefty sum towards the construction of the new school building but was also the Chairman of the Sacred Meadows School Trust. The Principal had an obligation. Mr. Kumar's son, Sanjay Kumar, would feature prominently in all the major school sports activities.

Sanjay Kumar was pot-bellied like his father. He could never fit into the role of a football player leave alone as left centre forward. Undoubtedly, Sanjay was the weak link in the team's attacking line. Sanjay hardly attended Tony's training camp. While all the boys had laboured on the field, Sanjay had spent the time on video games and fast-food joints. That is why almost every player in the team was demoralized. Like Tony, they all felt that Eric should be playing rightfully. And Sanjay should be the one to sit out of the games. All, except Krishna, the school captain. He was jealous of Eric's meteoric rise in the field. Last year Krishna brushed past his rival in winning the best player's trophy. Krishna longed to be the Pele or Maradona of the tourney.

He was grateful to Sanjay for blocking Eric's way to stardom. He had opposed Eric's entry into the earlier matches. Poor Eric! He had worked so hard. How he longed to skim over the turf and lead his team to victory. He wanted so much to fetch laurels for the school.

He marked the helplessness on Tony Sir's sporty, yet sad
face. Eric D'Souza, the substitute, now perched himself upon a green wooden bench and viewed the match like an eagle.

The Sacred Meadows forward line moved in like a fighter squadron towards their rival team's goalpost. Krishna looked sharper today, Abdul was playing well and Deepak had settled in. They made neat, short passes that even stumped Dipender. Yet, time and again, Sanjay bungled each sterling move. He would jump up to head the ball, falling flat upon his belly or behind. Of course, the ball would bounce upon his shoulders or on his back. At half-time, both the teams were goalless. Tony called Krishna aside. He sought a fresh opinion. Should Eric play? Can Sanjay be rested?

"Sir, let us wait till the finals," Krishna said because he knew that if the Sacred Meadows would make it to the final, then Mr. Rajiv Kumar would be the Chief Guest. And Tony would be forced to include Sanjay in the game.

The sizzling second half began with another short cry of the referee's whistle. Dipender Singh and the Roseland boys moved in like a swarm of bees. They raided the Sacred Meadows penalty box testing Unnikrishnan under the bar. Unnikrishnan, the goalkeeper, brought off a few spectacular saves, fisting off a blistering drive from Dipender's right foot, then punching away a volley over the goalpost and diving to stop a powerful kick.

Finally, with a few minutes to go for the final whistle, the Sacred Meadows were gifted with a golden opportunity. Abdul flicked the ball over a defender's head and the ball raced straight at Krishna. The goal was in front of him. There was only the goalkeeper to beat. Krishna deceived the goalkeeper and thumped the ball into a far corner of the net.

"Gooa...a...a...l!"

Tony rose, clapping his hands with joy, like a merry seagull. The spectators were jubilant, the supporters of the home team cheered lustily and the substitutes clapped their hands loudly.
The Sacred Meadows boys had romped home, victorious, a right to play in the finals. The players raised Krishna into the air and the captain rejoiced at his feat. He was once again going to be the school hero. Just one more game to go...

The school football finalists were greeted by a murky weather on the day of the finals. The spectators thronged the galleries. The girls and boys of the Sacred Meadows School sat upon a hillock overlooking the field resembling rows of soldiers in uniform. Then the Chief Guest, Mr. Rajeev Kumar, arrived. Mr. Jacob, the school Principal, led him to the front row of the reserved seats. Mr. Rajeev Kumar was dressed in a well-ironed black kurta and white dhoti.

Mr. Rajeev Kumar was jubilant. His son Sanjay was to play as the left centre forward. As the boys trooped into the lush green field, Tony ambled across to the substitute's bench. A tearful Eric addressed Tony, "Sir...won't I play today?"

Tony looked away, patting the wonderful footballer upon his eager shoulders: "You will play, my son, just wait and see."

At the outset, the Kendriya Vidyalaya was in full cry. The Sacred Meadows forwards were nervous, shaky and unsure. They messed up the passes; they volleyed out the long shots and misdirected their attempts at the goal. Then the audience was shell-shocked. Unnikrishnan, who had defended his goal so well, consistently throughout the tournament, slipped and the ball rolled over the goal line.

The score was Kendriya Vidyalaya 1 Sacred Meadows 0. Tony could not believe his eyes. Again and again, Sanjay fumbled with the ball. Krishna was not in his best element; Abdul looked overawed playing the finals. Deepak was so nervous he could hardly kick the ball whenever he took possession of it.

Suddenly, the match took an unusual turn. Chang made a solo dash at the rival's penalty box. He had Krishna to his
right, Sanjay to the left. The defenders guarded Krishna like a precious jewel.

Chang lofted the ball to Sanjay. The goalkeeper was caught off guard. In his excitement to score his first-ever goal, Sanjay tried to kick the ball, but spun like a top and crashed upon his face, twisting his left leg in the act.

The Chief Guest looked worried. A hush fell across the stands. The volunteers carried off Sanjay in a stretcher. A substitute would now be necessary.

Just then the half-time whistle blew. The Sacred Meadows players jogged out, unsure about the final outcome.

Tony turned to the substitutes. "Eric, you are going to play. Get changed."

Then as Eric warmed up, Tony whispered to him: "Eric, only you can make us win this final. Our school's prestige is at stake."

Krishna cast a curt look at Eric. "Keep feeding the ball to me," he said once they reached the playground, "I need to score one more goal to become the best player of the championship."

The referee blew the whistle to start the game again. The zebra jerseys were attacking from the left to the right. Eric dribbled the weary rival players with ease. He easily sliced through the defence and foiled the goalkeeper with a wrong-footer. The chap had dived to his right. Eric had netted in to the left of the goalkeeper.

The stands roared in jubilation. Sacred Meadows had equalized. His team members hugged Eric. Only Krishna turned away.

The score now was: Kendriya Vidyalaya 1 Sacred Meadows 1.

The game now became balanced. There were good moves by either team. Both the custodians made great saves. Then with about two minutes for the final whistle to be sounded, Eric took charge. He made a solo dash flanked by Krishna on his
right. He cleared the opposition. He cut through the penalty box. The helpless goalkeeper watched. Eric dribbled the ball on his feet. The goalkeeper charged out like a Spanish bull. But Eric had dribbled past him. Then instead of tamely placing the ball into the net, he passed the ball to Krishna. The captain made no mistakes.

"G...o...a...l!" the crowd erupted.

Krishna stopped in his tracks. Then he embraced Eric.

"Forgive me, friend," Krishna said, "without you, we would have sunk."

Eric's teammates flocked around him triumphantly.

The Sacred Meadows became the Inter-School Champions in football. The school Principal was elated. The Chief Guest called up Krishna for the presentation.

As the captain received his best player's trophy, he was touched. "Today I am the hero," he said, "yet without Eric's sacrifice I could never have won this honour. He deserves to replace me as the school captain next year."

Tony's happiness knew no bounds. He said, "Eric was always a deserving substitute. The truly talented always triumphs in the end."
The Worth Of A Skill

Manoj T. Thomas

Lawrence allowed the waves to lift him up and carry him towards the shore. The sea held no terrors for him as he calmly swam back the rest of the distance to the land. He ran home happily as the sea breeze evaporated the water off his body.

A sense of urgency shook him. He did not have a watch or a clock at his home. He knew there was not much time left for the swimming competitions to begin. The competition itself did not worry him, as he had been swimming all his life, but he had to reach the newly constructed stadium in about half an hour. He had been there before, and he knew that if he started now, he would be able to reach there just in time.

Lawrence knew that it would be the biggest break in his life. If he got the chance to represent his district in swimming, there could be a way out of his present poverty. He had not been to school and felt that he was too old to start now, even though he was only thirteen. He knew that if he won the swimming contest, he would have the chance to attend special sports schools run by the government, earn a scholarship, and even hope for a government job later. Everything depended on his winning the swimming championship. He knew that he would not have many serious challengers. On the sea front, his swimming prowess was legendary. He had the rare
gift of swimming fast as well as swimming over long distances. Presently, he was focusing on the 100-metre swim. He would consider taking up very short distance as well as long distance swimming later on. He reached home, wiped himself with a towel and started out for the stadium.

He was in a hurry to reach the stadium. If he took the recently developed road, he would take more time to reach; hence he turned towards the old road along the coast. This would also ensure that he would get fresh sea breeze all along the way. He wished he had a watch with him. There was no way of knowing whether he was on time or not. He cursed himself for staying in the sea for so long. He should have left earlier for the stadium. But he loved the sea too much; it was not possible for him to come out of the sea very easily.

His feet stuck into the sand and the smooth round pebbles felt hot on his feet as he started running the rest of the way to reach the indoor stadium.

Suddenly, he heard a voice. For a moment he thought that it was the water which had got into his ears which was making the sound. He listened more carefully and then he heard the sound again. It seemed to be the distinct voice of a woman crying somewhere. He crossed a hillock and looked towards the sea. There indeed was a woman. The moment she saw him, she began shouting and waving her hands frantically, indicating that someone was lost at the sea.

For a moment, Lawrence balanced his options. He did not have much time left to go to the stadium and needed to hurry if he were to be in time for the swimming competition. On the other hand, his skill was probably needed to help someone. After a second's indecision, he ran towards the sea.

Lawrence reached the woman in a few seconds. "My son...my son...he is lost," cried the woman inconsolably. She could not say anything more. She pointed out towards the open sea.

Lawrence took off his shirt as he ran on into the advancing
waves. He allowed the seawater to take him with it. Then he began to search for the boy. It was by sheer luck that Lawrence found the boy. The sea had taken the boy deeper, and Lawrence could see desperate waving in the distance. The boy apparently knew swimming, but probably was not used to swimming in the sea. Lawrence could make out the desperate movements the boy was making to stay afloat.

Lawrence began to swim towards the boy. It seemed to be a very long time before he reached the boy who was struggling against the sea. He helped the boy swim as he dragged him back towards the land.

Soon after they reached the shore, the boy ran to his mother who was all sobbing and crying and embracing the "boy. Lawrence was however exhausted and sat down for a minute to regain his breath. The brief bout of exertion had drained off his energy. Soon, he realized that he had to keep his appointment at the stadium. He ran towards the stadium.

On reaching the stadium, some very disappointing news awaited him. The 100-metre swim had just finished and some of the other events were going on.

He approached one of the officials who was walking about with a notepad in his hands. "I wished to participate in the 100-metre swim, Sir," said Lawrence sounding desperate.

"Then you are one year too early," replied the official rudely. "This year's race just got over."

Lawrence still tried to convince the official. "Could you please give me a chance, Sir," he said. "I was delayed due to unavoidable circumstances."

The official was unmoved. "If you can't maintain the simple discipline of coming on time for the competition, how can we expect you to be a disciplined representative of the district? We need sportsmen who are dedicated and sincere. Now, don't waste my time, I have plenty of other work to do."

Lawrence walked back home dejected. He had lost the chance
and now he would have to wait for another year to try for the team trials.

"What happened?" asked his mother, seeing his sad face when he reached home.

"Nothing," answered Lawrence, and sensing that his mother would ask some more questions, he ran out to do the only other thing which he knew well—fishing.

By the next day, Lawrence had more or less forgotten his disappointment at missing the swimming trials and had decided to get on with life as usual. He mended his nets in the morning and prepared to go deep into the sea to fish.

He was surprised to see a well-dressed man walk to his house. "Do you know where Lawrence lives?" asked the man.

Lawrence introduced himself.

"I am from the sports selection committee," continued the stranger. "We have decided to give you another chance to try and qualify for the district swimming team."

Lawrence could not believe his luck. This was beyond his wildest expectations. He dropped the fishing net and took the stranger immediately to the competition pool.

Lawrence swam the entire stretch alone and the stranger and two of the other sports committee members timed his progress. "You have taken much less time than all the other competitors to swim 100 metres," they said, pleased with his effort. Now that he had qualified, he began to wonder why they had decided to give him another chance.

He asked the stranger about it. "There was a woman who was telling us about how you had dived into the sea to save her child, due to which you were late to turn up for the competition," said the stranger.

Lawrence's good fortune had only begun. In the evening, he was told that he would be honoured for his bravery, and that the district administration had decided to give him a scholarship to help him improve his swimming skills.
Lawrence was honoured with a prize. The District Collector who gave away the prize, asked him, "Lawrence, when you ran to save the young boy, you must have realized that as a result you would be late for the race, so what made you take the right decision?"

"It was not difficult. Sir," said Lawrence. "I realized that if I could not swim to save the life of a young boy, my reputation as the fastest 100-metre swimmer in the district would be meaningless." The audience broke into rapturous applause.
Rajat was at the nets watching Adnan bowling to Bill. Adnan was the fastest bowler in the Junior School cricket team. Eight weeks ago, he, Rajat, had been the fastest. That was before his accident.

Rajat, a Class VI student of the Saint Joseph's High School, was one of the key players of the school's cricket team. He was fast and accurate.

Two months ago, he had met with an accident. The doctor had looked at the X-ray and had given Rajat the bad news. "You will have to be careful with your left shoulder and arm. You should avoid putting any strain on the left side of your body."

"But, doctor, I am a left-hander!" said Rajat.

"Oh! In that case you have to be doubly careful. Remember, any exertion could spell trouble," the doctor emphasized.

"Doctor, what about my cricket?" Rajat cried. "I am the fastest bowler of my team."

The doctor shook his head, "I am sorry, son. Bowling with your left hand is ruled out."

Rajat was shattered. Three months later, was the big event he had been waiting for—the Junior Inter-School Cricket Championship for the Sterling Trophy. Their school had
a good record and they had a fair chance of picking up the trophy. He had been working very hard for the championship. He knew his school depended a lot on him.

As he watched Adnan bowl now, he could not help cursing his luck.

A little later, Rajat felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up. Mr. T. Krishnan or T.K., as he was popularly known as, was standing beside him. He was their cricket coach. He had been a talented leg-spinner and had played for the state for more than a decade.

"Rajat, why don't you try bowling with your right hand?" T.K. said matter-of-factly.

"Coach, you must be joking," Rajat almost laughed at the suggestion. "You know I am a left-hander. I just cannot do anything with my right hand."

"Why don't you make an attempt?" T.K. was insistent. "And don't bowl pace, try spin bowling. I can teach you how to bowl leg-spin."

"Coach, here we are not talking about just being able to bowl," Rajat said. "We are talking about being able to bowl good enough to get into the school team."

"I know it is going to be very tough, Rajat," T.K. said confidently. "But don't give up without trying. Make an attempt, you have nothing to lose. Remember, cricket, or, for that matter, any sport, is not only about technique; it is also about temperament. Believe me, Rajat, you have an excellent temperament. You are hard-working and disciplined. Moreover, you are tough and you can keep your cool. These are your basic traits and they are with you even now and will be with you forever."

"Well, I will give it a try but..." Rajat was still hesitant.

"No buts. Meet me tomorrow in the ground at seven," said the coach.

The next morning Rajat's training started in real earnest.
"Let us start with a simple action," said the coach. "Since you are not used to bowling with the right hand just practice bowling slow and straight."

Rajat felt really funny bowling with his right hand. The fastest ball he bowled to the coach was ten feet off the target.


And so it went on and on. Every day for an hour, the coach and Rajat were at the nets.

After two weeks Rajat was able to bowl quite steadily.

"Now I will teach you leg-spin. If you are accurate, bowl according to your field and if you can puzzle the batsman with variations in your flight and speed, you can be very successful. Leg-spin needs a great amount of control, which requires discipline. And that is why I think you will be good at it," T.K. said showing Rajat how to grip the ball.

Rajat was a fast learner and totally committed to the task at hand. He started picking up the skills quite fast.

As he practised he improved, and as he improved, his confidence grew. Rajat continued practising religiously both in school and at home. When the team was announced for the championship, his name was in the fifteen.

The next day T.K. called Rajat and Ejaz, the captain of the school team, to his room.

"I have studied the various teams. We are in the easier group. I am confident we will reach the finals. I want to use Rajat only in the final match. He should be our secret weapon. None of the schools have players who can tackle leg-spin. If we play Rajat in the earlier matches, the opponents will have a chance to study his bowling and plan suitably. We should introduce him only in the final match and spring a surprise."

Things worked out exactly as T.K. had planned. The Saint Joseph's High School reached the finals without any upsets. In the final match, it had to face the Central School, the champions for the last three years. The match was to be
Rajat was brought into the team, and for the first time, he felt a trifle nervous.

Ejaz won the toss and elected to bat. The Saint Joseph’s High School team notched up 144 for the loss of eight wickets in the allotted thirty overs.

The Central School began slowly but accelerated soon after the fourth over. By the fifteenth over, they were 85 for the loss of three wickets. The pace attack of Adnan and Bujji could not do much. In the sixteenth over, Rajat was brought in.

Rajat knew if he did well now, he would find a permanent place in the school team as a leg-spinner. And if he failed he would be out.

Rajat bowled a steady line and length and the over yielded just two runs.

"Great job, Rajat," Ejaz said.

When Rajat came to bowl his second over, the score had reached the figure of 100.

The first three balls yielded no runs. Rajat now decided to try something different. Economy and accuracy alone would not do, he had to tempt the bowler. He pitched one delivery high as he had seen T.K. do it. The batsman at crease, Shoeb, came out and hoisted it over long-on for a six. There was a stunned silence all around. Rajat got flustered. He bowled a faster one, which was cracked to the square-leg boundary. The last ball was also pulled for a six.

Rajat was shattered. His one over had yielded 16 runs!

The empire signalled the drinks break. T.K. came rushing to the field. He found Ejaz shouting at Rajat. "Ejaz, relax. Give this guy a break. I think he got carried away by the initial success he had in tying down the opposition. Doesn't matter. Give him one more chance."

"Coach, that would be madness. The game would be finished in one over!" Ejaz exclaimed.
"Don't argue. Just do as I say. If things go wrong I will take the blame," T.K. snapped and turning to Rajat he said, "remember what I said. Temperament is more important than skill. Don't lose your cool. Bowl accurately and wait for them to make a mistake."

Ejaz gave the ball to Rajat after six overs with the score at 139 for six. The game was all but over.

This time facing him was Sundar, a stylish left-hander. Rajat bowled a straight ball. Expecting it to turn, Sundar went on the back foot. He missed the line and was rapped on the pad.

"Howzatt!" yelled Rajat and the umpire's finger went up.

Next was Peter, an all-rounder. Rajat now bowled a googly. This was one delivery he had practised very hard. Peter stepped back to square-cut. The ball turned sharply, kissed the outer edge and was eagerly gobbled up by Ejaz at the second slip.

Rajat was now on a hat-trick.

Out came Mohammed, the last man but a reasonably competent batsman. Rajat knew he had to get him out or at least prevent him from giving the strike to Shoeb, who was in great form. He bowled another googly. Mohammed managed to push the ball to mid-wicket and take a cheeky single. Shoeb was now on strike. The Central School needed four runs with one wicket in hand, and their star player was on strike.

Shoeb was very confident of finishing off the match with a boundary. He considered himself a very good player of spin and had proved it in Rajat's previous over.

Rajat bowled a straight delivery which Shoeb could not put away.

As Rajat came in to bowl the last ball, he had a feeling that this delivery could decide the fate of the match. He took a longer run-up and came charging, but instead of bowling a faster one he bowled a slow delivery bang on the middle stump. Shoeb, expecting a quicker ball, had gone on the back
foot. Caught by surprise, he tried to hit the ball over the bowler's head. Instead the ball went straight to the fielder at mid-off, who made no mistake in taking it.

The home crowd was on its feet cheering loudly. The Saint Joseph's High School had won the Sterling Trophy for the first time. Rajat was carried on the shoulders of his teammates for a victory lap.

"Coach, I don't know how to thank you, for having so much confidence in me," Rajat told T.K. in the pavilion when they were alone together.

"Rajat, I was a national-level gymnast, when an injury forced me out. If from gymnastics I could make a successful switch over to cricket, I felt you could surely shift from left arm pace bowling to right arm tweaking and beat the odds," T.K. said, thumping the 'man of the match' on his back.
When the bell rang for PT, I jumped up, my eyes aglow with excitement. The rest of the class groaned and rolled their eyes in my direction.

"Well, come on," I shouted cheerily and galloped down the corridor to the PT grounds. Mrs. Reddy rose almost reluctantly to her feet when she saw me.

"The bell rang a minute ago," she remarked, "you are extremely punctual, I must say." There was a ripple of indignant remarks down the line to the effect that I had browbeaten the girls into coming down early. But I ignored them and gazed fondly at Mrs. Reddy. My association with her went way back to my primary school days. I remember doing all sorts of thrilling things under her command.

She would roll out prickly horsehair mats on the ground and assign a few of us to each. Then we would have to perform complicated somersaults with exciting names like 'front roll' and 'back roll' on them. More often than not, I would end up in a twisted, tangled heap and Mrs. Reddy would leap to the rescue, extricating my limbs from unnatural angles and pushing them back to their original positions.

Then there were the cartwheels. We would have to spin ourselves round and round from point A to point B but I was
often a wheel out of control. I would go careening wildly to point Y instead and lie spreadeagled, breathless and hoping for the world to stop spinning about my ears.

"Maybe you should not do this particular exercise," Mrs. Reddy would say but I would refuse her offer outright. I meant to master anything and everything that had to do with sports because I loved it.

And then there were the horses—raised triangular wooden structures that you had to come racing at and jump over. They looked more like plateaus really, or like cup cakes that had gone wildly out of shape. I loved them too. Seeing Deepali and company sprint up to the horse, touch it lightly with their fingers and skim over it was such fun. And I was literally straining at the leash to be allowed to do it. Then I would run at the horse like a charging bull, soar into the air like a graceful hawk and touch the top of the horse—not lightly with my fingers but heavily with my bottom. I would utter a squawk of surprise and wait for Mrs. Reddy to rush up and extricate me (and my sore bottom!) from my elevated position.

Yet nothing could deter me, not even the remarks of my hysterical classmates who quickly identified me as their sole source of amusement. They would wait with bated breath for me to twist, tangle or tie myself in knots and then spend the rest of the class twisting and tangling and tying themselves up in laughter.

Not so Mrs. Reddy, however. Over the years, I had seen her grow from a young, brisk, energetic person to a not-so-young, slower person with a very resigned look on her face. Some even suggested that I was responsible for that look but I refused to believe them. For, after all, where would Mrs. Reddy find such an enthusiastic pupil? For I was in love with sports, every minute of it, every complicated exercise, every exhausting hurdle, every last bit of it. And I refused to believe I was no good at it. After all, I put in my best and it
was just bad luck that I ended up in unforeseen situations.

However, right now the air crackled with expectation. The inter-school sports competition was round the corner and most of the teams had been selected for the different events. I had practised so diligently under Mrs. Reddy's eye that I thought my body would crack a muscle or two. At first, I thought I would be chosen for the basketball team. I skipped nimbly between my towering colleagues and cleverly dodged and dashed but the others said I was a nuisance, that I got under their feet and hampered their movements—just as if I were a bothersome mosquito!

I rather fancied my chances at long jump. I visualized myself soaring over the sand and perhaps even the length of the pit. However, all I did was to bury myself in the sand, sending choking sprays of it in every direction and almost suffocating myself. I expected a tirade from Mrs. Reddy but she just shook the sand out of her hair and eyes and told me to rest a little.

Now only the racing teams were to be chosen. Ever since I could remember, I loved racing. Right from a memorable primary section crawling race where I held my own quite well, clouds of chalk billowing from my pinafore as I determinedly scrambled over the lines, my nose almost to the ground. I don't think I won that race but the feeling was wonderful. (So were the remarks of my mother when she saw my uniform!)

I watched Deepali and her coterie run round the field twice like energetic deer, without a single bead of sweat on their foreheads or any panting for breath. Their legs were like pistons, I thought, and immediately scanned mine for any signs of resemblance. They looked sturdy enough though on the skinny side. Still, they should stand me in good stead.

"You are not trying out for this too, are you?" Deepali asked me as she sank to the ground by my side.

"Of course, I am!" I exclaimed. "Why shouldn't I?"

She smiled. "You never give up, do you?"
I did not have time to answer because Mrs. Reddy was blowing her whistle and ordering seven of us to line up on the track. Whoever ran round the field twice within a stipulated time and came within the first three would qualify for the semi-final. I was quivering with excitement. In my mind's eye, I could see myself running the last and the decisive lap of the competition; being egged on by my school and pipping my nearest competitor at the post by a split second. Mrs. Reddy would shed tears of gratitude all over me and my talent in sports would be recognized at long last.

The whistle blew and I was off. Beside me, I could hear Anju snorting like a horse and Lina, on the other side, gasping for breath. Were they tired already? That left just five of us in the reckoning. I ran as smoothly as I could, trying hard to remember Mrs. Reddy's instructions. I tried not to look to my right or left and concentrated on the track. It was hard to do so, though, with the sound of thudding feet all round me and the mud from the track occasionally flying up and getting in my eye. At the end of the first round, I was in the third position. I heard encouraging shouts all round me. My heart was pounding so hard that I thought it would fly out through my mouth. My legs were giving me warning signals, as if they meant to buckle under me at any moment.

'Don't give up. Don't give up,' I muttered to myself and glared ferociously at the track as it flashed past me. There were only a few more lengths to go. I ran the race of my life then, I ran as if ferocious dogs were nipping at my heels, I ran as if my life depended on it, I ran till I could hardly see and my breath was choking me. The finishing line was just up ahead, I heard Anju grunting louder than ever and finally, I stumbled over it.

I was fourth. I could not believe it. And for the first time in my life before Mrs. Reddy, my eyes filled with tears. I had failed, and I had been so near to proving myself. It was bitterly
disappointing to have to give way to Anju who had trailed me all along. Deepali came up and patted my back.

"You did really well," she said, sounding faintly surprised. "I did not know you could run like that."

I stumbled away, the tears threatening to splash down my cheeks and stumbled right into Mrs. Reddv. She gripped my arms and forced me to look up. "That was a very good effort," she said softly.

I blinked away my tears fiercely. "But I didn't qualify, Ma'am," I said.

"Never mind that," she said unexpectedly. "I am very pleased with the way you ran. You have potential in this. There will be other races, other competitions, so don't worry about missing this one. Instead, focus on improving your running. I will help you."

All of a sudden, the world seemed less bleak. Hope surged in my heart. I would do it. I would practice till my legs fell out—but I would prove myself in sports some day. Maybe I had already proved myself a little today.

And I looked at Mrs. Reddy and smiled.
The bicycle wobbled as ten-year-old Rucha leaned forward in the seat and pumped the pedals.

"Hold tight, Vishnu! I will fall!" she shouted to the boy, who ran behind, steadying the bicycle. For the past two weeks he had been teaching her to ride.

"Don't worry, Ruchaji, you are doing well," he puffed. For a few moments he let go of his hold and Rucha was on her own. Of course, she did not know it and rode along smoothly.

"Vishnu, stop the cycle. I want to get off," Rucha called.

"Use the break!" Vishnu called out.

His voice came from some distance away and, Rucha realized that he was not holding the bicycle any more.

"I will fall! I will fall!" she wailed. And, before Vishnu could reach her, the bicycle wobbled, tilted to one side and Rucha was deposited into a bush.

Shaken but unhurt, Rucha cried angrily, "I told you to hold tight. I told you I would fall!" she glared at Vishnu.

"But, Ruchaji, you were riding quite well and anyway you have to learn riding without someone holding the cycle, isn't it?" Vishnu explained.

"See, I fell. Didn't I?" Rucha would not be pacified. She stormed into the house to complain.
"You fell. Doesn't matter," said her mother calmly. "We all do when we are learning to ride a cycle. At least you are not hurt."

"The bicycle is too big for me," Rucha complained. "When I am in the seat, my toes barely touch the ground."

Her mother explained to her that she found nothing wrong with it. Riding a cycle of that height was right for her. After all, she was growing up!

"Mummy, may I ride the bicycle?" asked Seema, Rucha's sister, younger to her by three years.

"No, Seema, you cannot," Rucha cut in before her mother could answer. "When it is so high for me, how can you sit? You are much shorter."

No amount of pleading helped.

There was a considerable contrast between the two sisters. Rucha was very protective of her younger sister. She assumed a parental stance with her. Rucha herself had been over-protected. She seldom did things rashly. Even in running and playing, she would be conscious of her movements. Seema, on the other hand, was bold and prone to taking risks.

Next week, inter-house badminton matches were to be held in the school. Rucha was in the senior team. She gave up other activities and practised with her friends.

"Rucha, hit harder," they told her on the day of the match. Aruna, a very good player of their house, was expected to win. And she did. Rucha and her opponent were almost evenly matched and Rucha lost the game by a couple of points. Their house stood second in the overall tally.

"I can't seem to win," said Rucha remorsefully.

"You played all right," Aruna consoled her. "The time when your opponent was at the net, if you had hit just a little harder over her head, you could have won that point."

"I know, I know," replied Rucha, "but somehow I always make such mistakes."
"You must practice more. That is all," Aruna told her.
"I suppose so," Rucha replied gloomily.
"Cheer up now," Aruna told her. "At least you tried. I say, the inter-school sports meet is coming up. You are in the school's relay team, aren't you?"
"I will probably make everyone lose the race," Rucha said, still gloomy.
"Don't think that way," Aruna pleaded with her. "You run fast. We need you."
Rucha finally agreed to stand in if no better person could be found. Meanwhile, she would train with the rest of them under the new PT instructor, Prakash Sir. He was very enthusiastic about sports and drove the children hard—praising, scolding, correcting but mostly encouraging them.
"Rucha, you are nimble and light. You can do better than that," he told her often.
"How can I do that?" Rucha confided to Aruna. "I will most probably fall."
"Don't be silly. We are all trying to better ourselves. You must try too," Aruna told her.
"Springfields have a very fast runner in their team."
Shabnam, their teammate informed them. "Has anyone heard about her? It seems they call her P.T. Usha!"
Prakash Sir overheard this conversation. He took a quick decision. "The girls' relay team, gather here in five minutes," he called out.
All the girls came together.
"Girls, I have been watching you all. You need some more practice, more time on the field. You are not doing enough," he told them.
Vociferous protests greeted this.
"All right, all right, girls, calm down," he held up his hands, placating them. "Tell me, what is your goal. To win the race, isn't it? Not just to make an attempt. To win! Are we agreed?"
The girls murmured their assent.

"I know you have been training. You just need to give a little extra push to your efforts to win. I know all of you have it in you," he told them.

"Right. Let us start with these exercises." He showed them exercises that would allow their legs to stretch more, stride faster. Then he trained them in the skill of passing the baton without losing speed.

"Don't slow down when you near your next team member," Prakash Sir said. "Maintain your speed while passing your baton. Only when the baton has left your hand, you slow down. Do you understand? And you, who are going to receive the baton, also keep in motion, jogging. Enough for today. Report to me same time tomorrow again." Then turning to Rucha, he said, "I want a word with you. You are apt to slow down after starting well," said Prakash Sir. "Don't do that. Maintain your speed," he advised her.

"Sir, I am not very good," Rucha said dolefully.

"No self-doubts, Rucha! This is exactly what I have been wanting to tell you. You must have a positive attitude. Don't even think of losing. See yourself winning! Think to win! Only to win! You can do it, I can feel it."

Rucha went home with Prakash Sir's words ringing in her ears.

The next few days saw the girls training extra hard. Prakash Sir was never far, even as he trained other children.

The day of the sports meet dawned and the children piled into buses to reach the venue. There was laughter and a great deal of joviality as Prakash Sir had seen to it that they were fit and relaxed as well.

The stadium, where the meet was being held, bustled with great activity. Children from several schools were moving around checking out the different venues where particular events were to be held.
Prakash Sir collected the schedule and gave the girls appropriate instructions.
The Principal of the host school inaugurated the meet with a short speech and also introduced the participating schools.
Then the events started. Rucha and most of the other children of their school easily got through the heats to enter the finals scheduled for the following day.
The next morning, after a few individual events, it was time for the girls' relay race. Four schools had entered the finals. Rucha, Aruna, Shabnam and Neelam were Team B. Prakash Sir gave them final words of encouragement. "Girls, you are a good team. You can win! Go ahead and show your mettle! Good luck."
Shabnam, a tall girl, was their first runner. She would pass the baton to Neelam, Neelam would pass it to Aruna, and Aruna to Rucha, who would be finishing the race for them.
The whistle blew and the first runners were off. With her long strides, Shabnam gave the team a marginal lead. But by the time Neelam had passed the baton to Aruna, both Team A and D had drawn level with her. Then, the runner of Team D fumbled and dropped the baton. Aruna ran for all she was worth, just managing to keep abreast of the runner of the Team A.
Finally, the baton was in Rucha's hand. She had already noted with dismay that she was pitted against 'P.T. Usha' of Team A. 'Just my luck,' the thought had flashed through her mind. She had quickly put that thought aside, and when the baton was passed to her, she was more than ready.
She heard the shouts of her schoolmates, "Rucha, come on! Ru...cha! Ru...cha!"
Out of the corner of her eye, Rucha saw 'P.T. Usha' beginning to overtake her. Fleetingly, she thought, 'Not again!' Then Prakash Sir's words came to her: 'Think to win!' The next moment, Rucha was conscious of nothing.
except the tape at the finishing line which she had to reach.

Totally absorbed, she ran, for how long, she did not know. No one would overtake her! She ran on, not conscious of the fact that the race was over till Aruna called out to her, "Rucha, you have won! We have won!" And she was hugging and kissing her.

Prakash Sir was beaming at her and everyone was applauding her. Even 'P.T. Usha' came over to shake her hand. "I thought I was fast, but you were simply superb!" she shook hands with her.

It is always a proud moment for the winner of a medal when she is called to the victory stand, but for Rucha, it had a double meaning. She had overcome her hesitations and denials. She could win whenever she chose to!
Madan and Nikhil were Class VIII students of the Sunflower High School. While both were good in studies, Nikhil was far better in sports. He was a natural sportsman and took to almost any sport like a duck takes to water. The only sport in which Madan had an edge over Nikhil was swimming. He had been swimming ever since he was a kid and was very good at it. Nikhil had taken to swimming after his father became a member of the City Club a year ago. And in just one season he had become an expert.

Madan had never really bothered about Nikhil's talent in various sports. But swimming, he considered his domain. He was the champion and he would remain one.

Soon Nikhil narrowed the gap between the two and a stage came when he was close to beating Madan in 50-metre freestyle—the most popular event in the pool.

And it so happened that the more tense Madan became about Nikhil beating him, the more his performance suffered.

One day Benjamin Tirkey, the sports teacher, announced that an inter-school swimming competition was being organized by the Youth Hostel Association of India at the City Club for different age groups. There would be a preliminary selection at 10 a.m. at the club to pick the participants from
the Sunflower High School. In each event only one participant would be selected to represent the school. Both Nikhil and Madan gave their names for 50-metre freestyle.

Every day in the evening they went to practice. On Saturday, at the insistence of his classmates, Madan agreed to participate in a mock race with Nikhil. He was extremely nervous and tense. And what he had been dreading the most, actually happened. He lost to Nikhil. This meant that if the same thing happened the next day, Nikhil, and not he, would represent the school in the 50-metre freestyle. Madan knew he would never be able to bear that. The whole night he kept tossing and turning in bed. In the early hours of the morning he got an idea. Yes, that was the only way out...

Soon after getting up, he rang up Nikhil and, after some casual banter, asked him when was he planning to leave for the club.

"I will leave by 9.30 a.m. The selections start at ten and our event will be the first."

Nikhil and Madan lived close by. From their house the club was a fifteen-minute ride.

At around eight that morning, Madan reached Nikhil's house. The door was closed and the curtains on the windows were drawn. The sounds from the TV filtered out. Madan looked around. No one was there. Everybody seemed to be busy inside the house. Madan removed around twenty nails from his pocket and opening the gate, walked along the garden path. Madan scattered the nails as he walked along. He then quietly slipped out and getting on to his cycle pedalled away. Madan was sure Nikhil's cycle would have a flat tyre. It would delay him sufficiently resulting in Nikhil reaching late for the swimming competition. And naturally with Nikhil out of the way, he would win quite easily.

Pedalling away furiously, his mind on Nikhil and the race, he failed to see a ditch. The next moment, his bike skidded and he landed in the ditch. After five minutes, he got up slowly.
It had been a nasty fall but luckily nothing seemed to be broken. However, his tracksuit was in a complete mess—muddy and wet. He picked up the cycle; he found that the handle was twisted. He tried his best to straighten it but could not. He looked around helplessly. It was a lonely stretch of the road and was quite deserted. It was not even safe to leave the bike there.

Cursing his luck Madan wheeled the bike along as fast as he could. He looked at his watch. It was 9.45 and the club was still a good three-kilometre away. He almost ran the entire distance praying he would meet a familiar face that would help him. But clearly luck was not with him. By the time he reached the club, dishevelled and bruised, it was 10.15. After keeping his bike in the stand, he rushed towards the pool.

"Has the swimming contest started?" he asked a youngster.
"Yes, two events are already over."
"That is the end of my dream," Madan thought feeling miserable.
Just then he heard a shout. It was Salim, the Head Boy of their school. "Where were you, Madan? I have been going crazy trying to locate you."
"I...I had a minor accident," Madan panted.
"Are you okay now? Get into your swimming trunks fast. In another fifteen minutes your race will start," Salim said.
"My...race? But...50-metre freestyle was to be the first event."
"It was, but Nikhil managed to get it postponed."
"P...postponed? But why?"
"Because of you, silly. He told Tirkey that you were the champion and we cannot have the trials without you. I too joined him and Tirkey was convinced. Nikhil, I think, has now gone to ring up your place. I must admit, I really admire your friendship," Salim said thumping Madan on his back.
Madan stumbled to the shower room, his head in a tizzy. Nikhil had managed to reach the club on time. And...and then he, Madan,
could participate. How decent, how loyal of him. And he had played a nasty, mean trick on Nikhil to prevent him from participating. His father always used to say, the importance was not in winning but in participating in any sport with a sportsman spirit. Nikhil had lived up to that while he... Madan felt ashamed of himself.

As he emerged he saw Nikhil racing towards him.

"Thank God, you have come. Salim told me about the accident. I am happy it was not serious. I too had a little bit of a problem. My bike had a flat tyre. Luckily Mohapatra Uncle was passing by in his car. He put the bike in the van and dropped me here," Nikhil said.

Madan looked at him very quietly. "Nikhil, I have to tell you something."

"Later, man, we have to rush for the race."

"No, please listen. It is very important. I did not want you to participate. So, I threw some nails on your garden path. That is why your bike had a flat."

Nikhil stared at him, "My God, Madan! How could you?"

"I am sorry. I am really sorry, Nikhil, for being so mean and selfish. I did not realize my mistake till I reached here. When Salim told me how you had persuaded Tirkey to wait for me, I felt disgusted with myself. As a punishment I will not participate in the race. I don't deserve to compete with you."

Nikhil looked at him for a few minutes and said, "You will. You will jolly well do it. The very fact that you have realized your mistake is ato...what is that word which our Principal keeps using...atonement...yes, atonement enough. Now, come on, get going and let me see you beat me in the race."

As the whistle blew, ten young swimmers executed a perfect dive into the pool. Nikhil took off with Madan not far behind. At the 25-metre stage they were neck and neck and this position continued till the very end. When the whistle blew it was still not clear who had won—Nikhil or Madan.
Nikhil and Madan, who had now become inseparable, practised very hard. Madan's father, who had been a state champion in swimming, helped them hone their skills.

The inter-school championship was a gala event with the best swimmers of the state vying for the honours. In the 50-metre freestyle, Nikhil won the gold with Madan coming a close second. And in the 100-metre freestyle, it was Madan's turn to bag the top spot with Nikhil claiming the bronze.

After the prize distribution ceremony, as they were walking out, Nikhil handed Madan a small plastic packet. Madan opened the packet—inside were twenty-odd nails.

"Wha...what is this?" he asked.

"The nails you had planted on my garden path. I had seen you doing it and after you left I had picked them up."

"B...but you told me your cycle had a flat and..." Madan said incredulously.

"Madan, I wanted you to realize your mistake," Nikhil looked at Madan and smiled, "and I think you did."
"Mamta, I want you to start practising your game seriously from today. I am taking you in the basketball team."

These words of the basketball coach surprised everyone. Selections have been going on for the school's basketball team, and the coach had chosen Mamta, who had joined the school only a month ago.

Mamta could not believe her ears. She had wanted to play basketball since she had joined the school, but none of the girls in her class was ready to teach her. In fact, some of the girls in the team had even laughed at her when they heard that the previous school in which she studied did not even have a basketball court.

Mamta had been studying in a small school in the nearby town till then, as her parents could not afford to send her to any of the public schools in the city. It was only because of the scholarship she had won from a trust, that it had been possible for her to join this reputed convent school. Being away from home, in a hostel, she yearned for some friends, but till now most of the girls had refused to accept a small-town girl as their friend. Most of the girls in the school came from rich families. They treated her as an unwelcome guest, who was too low in status by their standards.
"Sir, she has never played basketball before. How can you take her in the team?" their captain Saba complained.

"Don't be mean, Saba. There is always a first time for everyone. Can't you see how good her passes are? And physically she is more fit than any of you," the physical education teacher admonished Saba.

"Oh, no! Now we can forget all about winning the trophy in the inter-school basketball championship this year," grumbled Reema, the vice-captain of the team.

The other girls in her group also made faces to show their displeasure. What these girls did not know that if anyone told Mamta she could not do something, she accepted it as a challenge and never rested till she had proven them wrong.

The coach had heard Reema and said, "Have you been able to win the trophy a single time since you started playing? Maybe this year you will finally win because of Mamta."

Mamta was touched by that remark. She silently thanked the coach for his support and made up her mind to be so good at the game that the team would feel incomplete without her.

She thought of the famous words that her mother often repeated to her: 'Practice makes a man perfect'. So she started using all her free time in practising basketball. She was thankful that the coach was helping her in every way. She kept perfecting her passes and her techniques with firm determination. Even the snide remarks from the teammates only made her more resolute.

Like the time when she dropped a pass and Hema said, "Do you have butter fingers that you cannot even hold the ball properly?" or when Reema said, "Don't try to act nice on the court. It won't get you anywhere. You have to be a fighter to play this game, always on the offensive. Delicate girls like you have no place on the court."

Little did the girls realize that these remarks really brought out the fighter in her.
One month later, the school organized the annual sports meet. Mamta wanted to participate in the 400-metre race. She was a fast runner. She used to walk long distances in her town. That had helped her develop strong leg muscles and good stamina. On top of that she was also tall for her age. She would be competing against the school champion who had been winning the race for the past three years. Most girls laughed at her wish to win the race. After all, Mamta had never before participated in a race. But Mamta believed in herself. She knew she could run well. It was just a matter of rigorous practice. And, she wanted to win for a very strong reason. She felt that winning against the school champion would also help her somehow in her basketball game. So she started concentrating on her speed when she exercised in the morning.

The day of the race dawned. It turned out to be a close race. Towards the end Mamta caught up with the champion. Her eyes were fixed at the finishing line. Like Arjuna in the Mahabharata aiming at the fish's eye, Mamta too could see nothing else. And in the end she did win, though by a couple of seconds. It was so unexpected that there was a moment's silence all around as she crossed the finishing line. Even the judges on the field were surprised that someone looking so frail and delicate could run so fast. There was a lot of excitement on the field before Mamta was announced the winner.

The previous year's champion showed that she was a true sportsperson; she hugged Mamta and congratulated her. Then as Mamta received her prize, she also got a standing ovation. It had taken Mamta just a few moments on the field to become a celebrity. The race changed Mamta's image in the school. She became very popular and even her teammates were now less hostile towards her. This gave a massive boost to her confidence. Now Mamta wanted to play a major role in the match and win the inter-school trophy for her school, more than anything else.
She kept practising hard. She proved to be excellent with passes, and good at offence and defence. Being a fast runner, she could easily dodge her opponents and it sometimes looked as if she was flying with the ball. Before anyone could catch up with her she would have reached the basket. And her shots too were perfect most of the time.

Finally, the inter-school basketball competition started. In all, ten teams were participating in the competition. Mamta's school had never before even reached the semi-finals. So this year the girls were desperate to win.

Their team went up to the finals. Mamta had a big role in the team reaching the finals. Her shots never missed and being five feet six inches tall, she could easily pass the ball to whoever she wished to, and grab it easily when it was meant for someone else. With every game they won, her teammates respected her more than before. Without her they would have found it very difficult to reach the finals.

In the finals they were up against the city champions. The game finished with equal points for both the teams. So both the teams got three free shots each. The opponents were able to score only one shot out of three. From her team, Mamta was chosen to hook the ball. She had to score at least two baskets to win. All eyes were fixed on her.

She bounced the ball nervously, knowing fully well the responsibility she carried on her shoulders. Suddenly, she remembered Reema's words, the day she was chosen for the team: 'Now we can forget all about winning the trophy in the inter-school basketball championship this year.' Those words set her on fire again. This was her chance to show everyone how wrong they were. She made her shot, and it was a perfect basket. There was a loud applause from the audience. Both the teams were again equal.

But could she do it again? There was pin-drop silence in the field in anticipation of her shot. It was as if no one even dared
to breathe. Mamta bent her legs, raised the ball into position, and at last took the shot. She felt tears streaming down her face as the ball looped through the basket and bounced on the ground. Their team had made history. They had been participating in the competition for long, but it was the first time that they had reached the finals and had won it too.

Mamta's teammates came running from all around and hugged her. Everyone was shouting and dancing at the same time. There was cheering all around.

In the noise she heard Saba say, "I will never again prejudge people; I hope you can forgive me."

Reema too joined Saba and apologized to Mamta

Mamta clasped their hands and said, "Finally, I feel as if I belong here."

Just then their coach came forward to congratulate them. "Mamta, you did not let me down. Thank you," he said.

"No, Sir, I should be thanking you. Had you not shown faith in me the day you chose me, I would never have even learnt the game," Mamta said, wiping her tears of happiness.

She had really become indispensable for the team, all because of her determination and hard work.
"Why can't we stay where we are?" grumbled Pradeep.
"You know that Papa has had to take up this new job now that the old company has shut down," explained Mrs. Sahu patiently. "It is right in the heart of the town and there is a small flat to go with it. We could not have asked for a luckier break. And there is a good school nearby."
"But that school does not even have a proper playground! How will I continue with my athletics?" Pradeep asked.
"You will have to find a way," said his mother, turning and carrying on with her packing. She did not want to admit to Pradeep that she was as upset as he was about all that had happened. It had been a difficult six months for the family.

The factory where Pradeep's father worked had had a devastating fire and, despite the insurance money, could not recover financially. After the factory had shut down, it had not been easy for Mr. Sahu to get another job, and so when he was offered one in the town, he had jumped at it. He had to travel over 20 kilometres a day and had reached home exhausted every night. But now, because of his hard work, he had been given a promotion and with it, a flat in the town. It was a wonderful offer. True, Pradeep would have to adjust to a new school, but at least there was a good one close by.
"I will never have a place to run," sighed Pradeep after a week at the new school. "The playground is a cement patch and I cannot keep running round and round that, can I?"

"Why don't you run on the streets early in the morning and late in the evening, when they are not so crowded?" suggested Mr. Sahu. "That way you can keep up with your training and also run a few errands for your mother."

Pradeep had no choice but to do that. He had been running since he was in Class VI and had won medals in the State Athletics Championships in the 400 metres and hurdles. The coach at the old school had encouraged him to practice long-distance running and Pradeep had loved practising on the unpaved roads and fields where there was no traffic and no disturbance, only the wind and the sun and the sky. He still had one year to go before he became too old for the junior category and the National Athletics Meet was coming up in eight months. He wanted to participate and he wanted to win too.

So Pradeep started out on his new training schedule. Very early in the morning, when there was no one around, seemed to be the time that suited him best. Sometimes, he would meet up with a man or two stumbling home and often he would find people slumped on the roadside itself.

Then one morning, Pradeep came upon a man bent over a stick, shuffling along an alley. He hailed Pradeep in a shaky voice as he passed. "Could you take this letter to the house with the blue door there?" he asked. "I don't have the strength to walk."

"Sure," said Pradeep, jogging on the spot as he waited for the man to hand over the letter.

"Ring the bell and give it to the man who answers," instructed the old man.

Pradeep did as he was told, and when he handed over the letter, the man exclaimed loudly, "Who gave this to you?"

Pradeep pointed down the road where the old man had been
standing, but as he looked, there was no nobody there. How had the old man gone out of sight so fast?

The man at the door reached for him threateningly, and Pradeep backed away, then took to his heels. Lucky thing that the poor old man had not gone with the letter himself, Pradeep thought as he ran off. How would he have got away?

A couple of days passed and then again, he came upon the old man. This time, it seemed that he had been waiting for Pradeep. He had a small parcel in his hands. "Here, son, take this to that house there," he said. "I will give you a tenner for your trouble."

"I don't need that, Uncle," Pradeep replied, mindful of how his mother had always told him to be helpful, especially with elderly people. "I will leave the packet on his doorstep."

"No, you must give it to him in his hands," instructed the old man.

"He is not a very friendly man," said Pradeep reluctantly.

"That is why he must have this," the man persisted, and Pradeep took the parcel from his hands. It was not very heavy and within seconds, Pradeep was at the same blue door. He had hardly lifted his hand from the bell when the door was flung open and the same man stood there, a stick in his hand this time.

"I knew you would be back," he snarled, grabbing hold of Pradeep's collar and pinning him to the wall. "What are you getting out of this deal? Tell me? Should you not be in school like other boys of your age?"

Pradeep was terrified. What would this man do to him? Pradeep looked back towards the old man and to his amazement, he saw the old man running around the corner and was out of sight in no time. A chill went through Pradeep. How could that old and bent man, who could barely walk, run the way he had just seen him do?

"That is him!" he pointed. "He is running! But I thought he
... was too old to walk, that is why I delivered his letter and have brought you this now!"

The man stared down at the parcel in Pradeep's hand and his face turned pale. "We are dead!" he cried. He grabbed the parcel, put it to his ear, sniffed it, and then kept it down carefully on the side of the street. "Run!" he said. "There are explosives inside! And now I will never get my child back!" He raced off in the direction the old man had taken.

Pradeep was dumbstruck. What was he to do? If there was really a bomb in the parcel, how could he leave it there and run away? There were so many people sleeping in the houses around. He had to do something! He picked up the packet and began to run with it towards the riverbed that was now almost dry because the monsoon rain had not yet started. It was his only hope. If only he could reach that before anything happened.

Pradeep's mind blanked out as he ran, instinctively taking all the short cuts he had learned during his daily runs. It seemed to be hours before he reached the riverbed and he was dripping with perspiration, fear making his heart pound in his ears and take on the same beat as his steps. He slid down the slope and jumped from rock to rock, trying to get as far away from the houses as possible. At last, he bent and left the parcel on a rock, then turned and raced back again. He did not know how far he had gone when he heard the blast. He went flying in the air and he felt a flash of pain. "I was too slow," he thought as he sank into darkness.

When he recovered consciousness, there was a small crowd around him. The only face he recognized was that of the 'angry man', not looking so angry now, only anxious. "What is your name, boy?" he asked. "That was a very brave thing you did, to take the bomb away from where it could kill people in their homes."

Pradeep could barely whisper, but he managed to give his address and soon his parents were called.
In the hospital, the police came to see him with the 'angry man' and a young boy of his own age. "We have nabbed several members of the gang," the Inspector told him. "Mr. Das here caught the man who gave you the parcel and he led us to where Mr. Das' son was held captive."

Pradeep was confused. "But what did he want?"

The Inspector laughed. "Mr. Das is a scientist who works with the Defence Department. He was being approached for information and since he would not give any, his son was kidnapped when he came here to his family home for a holiday. You were the one who carried the ransom note to him, remember?"

"Ransom note?" gasped Pradeep. "I thought I was just saving an old man a walk when he could barely move..."

"Old man!" laughed Mr. Das. "I can assure he is not old. I had a tough time catching up with him!"

Pradeep stared open-mouthed at the Inspector and Mr. Das. Just an ordinary morning run to train for his athletics and look where it had landed him! 'But I won't think of that,' he thought, closing his eyes and lying back. 'I will think only of getting back on my feet and running again!"
Sunil steadied his eyes upon the white and black squares. He thought awhile before pushing one of his rooks into his opponent's territory in line with the opponent's king.

"Check!"

Sunil was sure he had Akshay Tandon, the reigning District Junior Chess Champion, on his backfoot. Akshay took out his handkerchief and dabbed the perspiration streaming from his thick, black eyebrows.

Akshay decided to defend his white king with his bishop. Sunil played his black knight to an impregnable position. He had trapped his opponent's king.

"Checkmate!" Akshay stood up and shook hands with Sunil. "Congratulations!" he said and walked away.

Sunil, the unseeded player, the dark horse of the tournament had moved into the finals causing several upsets along the way.

Sunil now headed straight to the nursing home where his Grandad was ailing. Sunil loved him deeply. It was he who had taught him the basics of this mind game. As a kid, Sunil used to observe as his Grandad would relish the battle of wits with his friends.

Then one day, Sunil had challenged him to a friendly game.
To everyone's surprise, Sunil played a superb game. His Gaan&ad started teteVvcv^ Vww, \woks ow dve^s fern District Library.

Sunil learnt about the lives of great chess players like, Capablanca, Fischer, Kasparov and India's Grandmaster Viswanathan Anand. He learnt that chess is a strategic game. He specialized in Advanced French Defence. There were modes of play—Sicilian, Pirc and other variations.

Sunil's Grandad had one wish which remained unfulfilled to this day. He yearned to be the District Chess Champion. He had worked relentlessly towards his goal. However, Sunil's Grandad could never make it to the semi-final grade in this annual chess tourney.

Now Sunil carried his dream when he entered the tournament even as his Grandad lay on his deathbed. Throughout this tournament Sunil could never get his sick Grandad out of his mind. Sometimes in the middle of an intense game of chess, Sunil's mind would wander to his Grandad. 'Will I get to see him after the game?'

Every win by Sunil made his Grandad's face glow with joy. During the entire tournament, Sunil spent each night beside his Grandad's bed. He knew that the news of each victory kept the old man going. He was strong-willed too.

When Sunil reached the nursing home, his Grandad was sitting propped up in bed.

"Sunil," he put up a fading smile, "you won today?"

Sunil nodded his head. He described his chess war with Akshay in great detail—how he had warded off the aggressive moves and then turned the tables upon his opponent. It had been such a sweet win for him.

"Sunil," said his Grandad inspired by his grandson's mind game, "you are now all set to fulfil my dream. I will live to see you become the District Chess Champion, I promise."

On the day of the finals, a call from the nursing home sent
Sunil's parents scurrying. Grandad's condition was serious. His illness played upon Sunil's mind as he took to the top board. He was pitted against a Maths Professor from a nearby college. Venkatesh Koshy was his name.

Sunil started off on a cautious note. He structured his pawns defensively. Then, after Koshy had castled his king, Sunil launched an assault. The intelligent bespectacled teacher smartly checked Sunil's threatening moves. It was now Koshy who attempted to make inroads into Sunil's defence. A tense middle game followed. Sunil was in control with some sharp positional play.

For a moment, Sunil's concentration wavered. His mind travelled to his Grandad—to another intense battle, a battle of life and death—and Sunil made a blunder! He had moved his bishop unguarding his queen. Koshy claimed Sunil's queen. Sunil realized that he was now fighting a losing game. Yet he played on gamely. Finally, it was all over. When Sunil clambered up to the podium to receive his runner-up trophy and a cash prize of Rs. 1,000, he was a trifle sad. His heart spoke out: 'If only my mind was not burdened with my Grandad's illness, I could have won...'

The Chief Guest was all praise for this young player. "We conduct this tournament to unearth talents in the world of chess," he said. "Sunil is one such rare find. We are sure he will take our district to new heights in the future."

Every spectator applauded Sunil's creditable performance. Little did they realize the state of Sunil's anxious mind.

As Sunil rushed to the nursing home, he remembered how his Grandad had nurtured his chess skills.

"Chess is a game of high mental skills," his Grandad would explain. "The aim of the game is to capture your opponent's king with the help of your rooks, bishops, knights, queen and pawns. I am sure you will learn to win many mind battles in life...on and off the playing board."
Sunil stopped by a watch shop. He bought a silver-coloured wristwatch. He knew it was another of Grandad's wish unfulfilled. He had desired to be a chess champion and present Grandma with a wristwatch in celebration. Sunil carried the watch in his trouser pocket. He would surprise his Grandad... he only wished he was alive.

When Sunil reached the nursing home, he was blessed with good news. His Grandad was recovering.

He fervently spoke to Sunil: "The news of your victory has kept me alive," he muttered. "My mind refused to die."

Sunil was very sad.

"Dadaji," he held onto the old man's feeble fingers, "I lost. I have failed to bring you happiness. I am sorry..."

"It was all my fault," Sunil's Grandad apologized. "My fading health had kept your mind on tenterhooks. It does not matter, Sunil. Next time."

"I tried my best," Sunil admitted, "yet I was worried and often my thoughts veered around you again and again..."

"Chess has taught me a great lesson," said his Grandad, recouping his strength. "I have learnt to tame my mind. See, my mind has won the battle over my body. I will live, I will recover, I will go home and wait till you become a champion."

Sunil was relieved. He smiled with joy.

He had fought till the last with his opponent in the finals. Grandad too had fought and was successful in his battle for survival.

Finally, Sunil sprang the surprise he had held back on his Grandad.

"A wristwatch?" Grandad took a few minutes to understand. "For Dadima? Isn't it? You remembered?" His elation knew no bounds. "How thoughtful of you, Sunil!"

Dadima was equally happy to receive her long-awaited treasure, that too, from her grandson.

It was as if Grandad himself had won the honours in chess.
Sunil was delighted. His Grandad not only recovered and returned home, he continued to inspire Sunil's chess games.

Chess had taught Sunil how to counter the ups and downs of life. "It is all a matter of mind," said his Grandad. "If you don’t mind it, it does not matter."

Sunil won many battles across the chessboard. He eventually became the District Chess Champion, which pleased his Grandad immensely.

"Chess is for those who are analytically bent," said Grandad, "it sharpens one's mental skills."

"One day I would like to be a Grandmaster," smiled Sunil, "and win laurels for my country."

Sunil read about the struggles and triumphs of Indian chess players like, Sasikiran, Harikrishna, Thipsay, Barua and Koneru Humpy and hoped his name too would figure among them one day.
A week ago, the unthinkable happened.

Sudhir, who played left-out in the school’s hockey team, threw away a crucial goal. Not only did his team lose the match, it also lost the coveted inter-school trophy. For many days afterwards, Sudhir re-lived the nightmare.

Baljit, the tough, well-respected coach had dinned it into their heads: a good hockey player must convert the half-chances.

Half-chance? Sudhir had missed a sitter! It was a perfect lob from Rajbir, the team's back. Having slipped through the defence, the ball was in an ideal scoring position; not too angular. A gentle scoop by changing the body posture or a crack to the net from a better hitting position would have sealed the score. The goalkeeper had charged early, leaving the goalpost not just undefended, but positively wide open and welcoming. In that single minute, the defence seemed to move almost in slow motion. Lazily, the seconds slid past giving Sudhir ample time to choose a scoring position. Then, for no apparent reason, he decided to use the reverse flick for which he had earned a sort of reputation. Part of it was the desire to show off. The other part was the challenge, the risk in raising the level of difficulty. Result: the ball hit the board from the
outside. A sure goal was wasted or rather thrown away.

The crowd bayed for his blood. His teammates would gladly have strangled him. A furious Baljit ordered him to sit out the rest of the game. Sudhir watched the game through a blur of tears. He watched his team lose by a solitary goal. No one said a word to him as they walked past, heads hanging in shame. No one stopped to commiserate with him. He was a pariah. Once the star, he was now expendable. From hero to zero, he thought sadly.

For a week Sudhir shunned the field. His teammates would gather for practice. But he lacked the courage to go in their midst and face the hostility and contempt that he felt he would be subjected to.

"Sudhir, why have you not been attending practice?" a voice interrupted his brooding. To Sudhir's ears it sounded harsh and accusing. He flushed under the stern, relentless gaze of Baljit.

"I have not been well," he mumbled.

"Isn't that just an excuse for hiding after a disgraceful performance?"

It stung, as it was meant to.

"I did not play badly," Sudhir said with some show of spirit. At that moment, he hated Baljit and his cool, taunting voice.

"Oh, yes?" Baljit said softly. "You missed a sitter. And, as if that was not bad enough, you have been behaving like a wimp, ever since. If you don't know how to face up to your mistakes, you should not venture into a game. Any game."

"Did you hear how they booed at me?" Sudhir asked, unable to hide the torment in his voice. "Did you see them laugh?"

"You deserved it," Baljit said calmly. "Everyone makes mistakes. Even terrible mistakes are excusable if you learn from them. But what lesson have you drawn apart from one in self-pity? How will you teach yourself not to repeat that mistake? Not by avoiding play, but by going into it with
a determination not to repeat it. Now, enough of all this. Go to the field and be ready to play."

Impervious to Sudhir's despair, Baljit turned away. Sudhir slowly made his way to the changing room. Surprisingly, his teammates were welcoming.

"Hi, man. Nice to see you emerge from exile," Naveen, the captain said. Sudhir searched his face for any sign of mockery, but he found none and slowly relaxed. But the very next minute, Baljit appeared again, chivvying them to get ready for the game.

"Give it your best, boys," he said as usual. Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Sudhir, you will be playing right-in today."

'I have been shifted because now he thinks I am just not good enough,' thought Sudhir sadly. 'I guess I deserve it.'

The game began. It was the weekly game that they played with a local club. The opposing team was good and the first half of the game moved fast. The teams attacked again and again, displayed good dribbling and executed excellent passes, but when it came to a scoring opportunity, players from both sides became hesitant, almost nervous. Baljit noted this thoughtfully. He particularly watched Sudhir. The boy was playing with a finesse he had never before displayed. As the game progressed, surprise changed to awe: Sudhir was a natural right-in.

At half-time, the players huddled around the coach, waiting for words of wisdom from him—the homilies and the all-important criticism.

"Well played, boys," Baljit said and then tore them apart for their tardiness in scoring and all those lost chances. He was not unpleasant, just coldly analytical. A whistle shrilled to mark the end of half-time. The players began moving back to the field.

"Just a minute, Sudhir," Baljit held him back. "Listen, son,
Finally, So, go (Sudbrooke) be not interested, not knowing still aligned strength. It was expected weaving soaked of being big, big, big, big, long? A never before through they are players were a goalie(Sudbrooke) a pass, a little a little

His(Sudbrooke) a break in the ball the hand. His when it was the outside goalke(Sudbrooke) It was not

Sudbrooke approv; shape form

The goal—to
you are playing well. So stop wasting your time and take a shot at the goal. You have not made even one attempt at it. Finally, the scoreboard is the only testimony to your talent. So, go on and score. Do you hear me?"

Sudhir was speechless. He had hoped that it would not be noticed: that he was trying his best to avoid scoring. He did not know why, except that the nightmare of the last week was still alive. With every passing second of the game, he had felt strength and confidence flowing back into him. His stick work was excellent; his passes prompt. And there was the joy of weaving in and out, with the cool breeze in his hair, his sweat-soaked shirt clinging to him. There was the sweet pleasure of being part of the game once more—a part of something big, bigger than him at least. How had he kept away for so long? And yet, when it came to scoring, he shied away. He had never been afraid before. Now, he was. And Baljit had seen through his sham and exposed it. But he had also said, "You are playing well..." Sudhir hung on to that as if the words were a talisman.

His chance, the first one, came when Naveen sent him a pass, a sizzling shot that defied interception and reached a little ahead of his right-in position.

Sudhir stopped the stinging hit with his stick and making a break with the ball, dribbled past two players. He tapped the ball into a good scoring position and entered the D-area. His whack at the goal was a real beauty. The ball whizzed past the outstretched stick of the back and the padded legs of the goalkeeper to hit the left inner board with a loud thud.

It was a perfect field goal!

Sudhir's teammates thumped his back. Baljit shouted his approval and encouragement. Life regained its former healthy shape for Sudhir.

The game gathered pace. Sudhir's team scored another goal—this time it was from a penalty corner. But the real
icing came in the dying minutes of the game, with the third
goal. It was Sudhir who scored again. He managed a solo run
down the flank and dribbling past the defence was half turned
away from the goal. It was not a scoring chance, but backed
with his renewed confidence he was unstoppable. Scooping
the ball with a reverse flick he had the opposition wooden on
their feet, watching helplessly as the ball swung into
the goalpost.

Sudhir looked across at his coach and grinned.

Baljit shook his head in a 'You will not improve' gesture but
he also had a big smile on his face.

This was the half-chance that Baljit kept talking about and
Sudhir had scored by using the same difficult manoeuvre that
had led him to miss a sitter in the last match. They won the
match 3-0.

For Sudhir what mattered most was that he was back where
he belonged—on the field. And he was the happiest person.
Arif rubbed his knees gingerly. He knew that he had to be fit for the next day's match. The inter-house matches were going on and he was going to make sure that he played well in the next match. They were going to meet the Red House in the next match and the Reds had been claiming that they had never lost to the Blues. Arif was sure that there was always going to be a first time. The match was also important because his team, the Blue House, needed a win to get the two points necessary for them to get into the finals. He was their star player and could not afford to be injured for such an important match.

The amount of practice he and his teammates had put in before the match also had been phenomenal. Arif was having the feeling that they were playing some very important tournament, when it was actually only a small match between the different houses in the same school.

"This is going to be our most important match," said Vikas, the captain of the Blues, trying to lift the morale of his team before the match. "Give everything," he said. "We want a victory at any cost. I repeat, we want a victory at any cost."

They had practised till all of them had been completely tired. Their game plan was almost final and they were beginning to
play well as a team. They had plenty of coordination too.
"There is no reason why we should not win this match," said Santosh, their goalkeeper.
"We won't lose unless you concede a goal," said Vikas.
"I won't let the ball get past me," said Santosh with determination. "The Reds are going to lose this time!"

They still remembered, with anger, the last match they had played with the Reds in the previous year's finals. They had been leading by a goal till half-time, after which the Reds had turned violent. The Blues had become slightly subdued by the violent tactics and the Reds had used the resultant confusion to strike two quick goals towards the end of the game. This time, the Blues had decided that they would not allow the Reds to get away with their rough tactics.

The team went to the ground with determination. The Reds were already on the ground. They too looked confident. Among other things, the main strength of the Reds was their goalkeeper, Praveen. Everyone believed that it would be very difficult to get the ball past him. Their players also looked smart in their red-coloured T-shirts and shorts. The supporters of the two teams were lined up on both sides of the playground. As the match was expected to create a lot of tension and excitement, they had taken no chances with the refereeing. They had convinced their sports teacher, Mr. Sahu, to stand in as the referee for the match. Mr. Sahu gave the whistle and the match got underway.

With the kick-off, the match started. It was tougher than what Arif had imagined. The Reds obviously had the impression that Arif was the star player of the Blues and had decided to target him from the beginning. Even as Arif would be thinking of getting to the ball, he would find that a Red house player would come out of nowhere and stop him by force. These attacks did fetch their team a couple of free kicks, but Arif was beginning to feel the pressure of the game, every time he
was pushed on to the ground. For a while, he tried to stay away from the ball. He noticed that the player of the Reds, who was marking him, was paying no attention to the ball and was trying to keep a close watch on Arif.

The game had begun to get rough. Arif felt that the Reds were adopting their usual strategy. However, this time the Blues had responded well. The players of both sides were seen falling on the ground or nursing their injuries. Soon neither of the teams was able to make much headway and the game was being played in the midfield only.

Arif knew that the Blues had to score in order to get the two points. He had to run fast enough and also introduce an element of surprise in order to get rid of the player who was marking him. He ran towards the ball and with a sudden action he stopped. Then he turned and ran back. The player who was marking him was caught off guard. Arif was fairly deep into the rival territory by now and the other players of his team had realized his position. Vikas managed to move along the flanks and sought out Arif who was free of the player who had been marking him. Arif got a beautiful through pass and he dribbled the ball close to the opponent's goalpost. There was total confusion at the goalpost of the Reds. There were also a couple of Blue players who were adding to the confusion. They seemed to be pushing against each other and Arif tried to dribble through the confusion. Now he was very close to the goalpost and his primary task was to put the ball past the goalkeeper who had valiantly foiled their earlier attempts.

As he jumped over a player who had fallen over the ground, Asif realized that it was the goalkeeper and he seemed to be badly injured. For a moment, Arif had a vision of the vacant and unprotected goalpost where he could push the ball through and claim his team's rightful victory. Then he realized that the referee had not noticed the fallen goalkeeper. Arif stopped by the ball and did not shoot. There were cries of
"shoot" from his teammates, but Arif did not. He was signalling to the referee, showing him the injured player. The referee noticed the injured player and decided to stop the game.

The goalkeeper, Praveen, seemed to be injured seriously. He was not able to walk by himself and had to be carried off the ground unconscious. They had to complete the match in his absence. Another of the Reds took Praveen's place at the goalpost and the play was resumed. There were only five minutes left in the game and both the teams tried their best to score. However, the game got even more rough and during much of this short period, the game took place in the midfield and neither of the teams could do any scoring. They had to console themselves with a draw and split with one point each from the game. The Blues went back disappointed—they had missed the chance to go up in the tournament.

"What were you doing there with the ball?" asked Vikas, the captain of the Blues, unable to hide his anger and frustration. "There, at that moment, you had the goalpost undefended before you and, of all things you had to call up the referee. It seemed as if you did not want the Blues to win."

"No, what he did was right," protested Santosh, their goalkeeper. "Winning is not that important. Even if Arif had kicked the ball over the unconscious goalkeeper, the victory would have been meaningless. And if the referee had noticed the injury earlier, he would anyway have stopped the play."

"Yes," agreed the rest of the team and Vikas also had to accept the general view.

Arif's action seemed to have touched a chord with the Reds who were known to be the most aggressive of the lot. In the remaining matches and in the next few years they were much more polite and softer in their approach to the game. Arif's gesture seemed to make them also realize that there was something in the game, which was more than merely winning it.
"Anand bhair

Anand looked up. He was sitting in his one-room shanty in Angad Basti, a slum bordering the Modern Colony, reading a book. Bailu, Tikia, Raja and Javed were standing around him, their faces long and sad. He was the only graduate among the residents of Angad Basti. That made him the undisputed leader of the youngsters.

"Yes?" he asked.

"The Modern Colony boys came and told us that from tomorrow they would be practising every day and that we would not be allowed to play where we play now," Bailu said.

"Let me talk to them," Anand said.

Next evening Anand accompanied by Bailu and Tikia went to the ground where the youngsters were playing.

Anand called Sartaj whom he knew vaguely. Sartaj was a tall and good-looking fellow who thought no end of himself. He was a student of Class X and the captain of the school football team. He walked towards Anand with a swagger and asked, "What is it?"

"Why have you asked these kids to stop playing here?" Anand asked pleasantly.

"This ground belongs to the residents of our colony, and not
to you, the slum dwellers." Sartaj gave Bailu and Tikia a contemptuous look.

"I am not disputing that. But these kids have been playing here for many years. And you have two more grounds in the campus. You can play there," Anand said without losing his cool.

"We have formed a team called Modern Colony Chums or MCC," informed Sartaj. "We will be participating in a football tournament to be conducted by the Hyderabad Football Federation. We need a proper ground to practice. The other grounds are not convenient. They are too far off."

"Fine, then you decide what time you want to practice. They will choose some other time to play," Anand suggested.

By now Vijay and Peter, Sartaj's friends, had also joined him. "No question of it. This ground is in a miserable state. My father has promised to make it suitable enough for us to play. If we allow these uncivilized brutes to play, they will mess up everything. From a football ground this will turn into a wrestling pit," Sartaj said rudely. His friends sniggered.

Anand who had been trying his best to control his temper snapped, "Mr. Sartaj, please don't think that only you are sophisticated enough to play football and all the others are worthless."

"Then what do you think these two are? Maradona and Pele?" Sartaj said and his friends howled with laughter.

"These two might not be Maradona and Pele but with a bit of practice Angad Basti team has the potential to beat your team," Anand said calmly.

"Really!" Sartaj said his lip curling in contempt. "Then why don't we have a match? If you guys win, the ground is yours and if we win, you will not be allowed anywhere near here. Do you have the guts to accept?"

"Yes! But we need this ground for practice," Anand put in quickly.
"Fine. You can practice in the morning from six to eight," said Sartaj grandly.

"All right, when should we have the match?" Anand asked.

"A month from now," said Sartaj.

Later when they were sitting in the clearing in front of Anand's shanty, Tikia said, "Anand bhai, why did you accept Sartaj's challenge? You know it is impossible for us to win," Bailu asked.

"Yes, Anand bhai, how can we beat them? They practice regularly in school, they know the rules and regulations and they will also have a coach to train them," Tikia added.

"And they have football shoes while we will be playing barefoot," Raja said.

Anand looked at the worried faces and smiled. "I know the task is difficult, but it is not impossible. I will coach you."

"You!" exclaimed Bailu and Tikia together.

"Yes. I was the captain of my college team."

"Anand bhai, I still don't think we have a chance," Tikia said.

"Tikia, let me tell you something. No game is won or lost merely on the field. Many a time it is won or lost in the mind. If you think you are going to lose then you will." Anand paused and looked at the anxious faces in front of him and continued, "I have seen you people play. That is why I am telling you that it is possible for you to win. Your style is crude but with some improvement it can be effective. Now let me ask you a question. What is at stake in this match?"

"The ground," answered Bailu.

"No, Bailu, you are wrong. It is not the ground, it is your self respect which is at stake. You heard what Sartaj called you—uncivilized brutes! You heard the way he talked; you saw the smirk on his face! You have to win to wipe that smirk from his face. You have to win to show that what you lack in
privileges you can make up by sheer grit and guts. You have to win not for the ground but for your pride and the pride of Angad Basti."

The next morning at six the practice started. For an hour Anand explained to them the rules and regulations of the game and then they started playing.

Later, while they rested under the shade of a neem tree Anand said, "Let us call our team 'Angad Avatars', right?"

Everyone nodded.
"One more thing, we have only ten players. And we need one more player."
"Can I play?"
Everyone turned. It was Langdu Ram, a lame twelve-year-old who had been watching them practice.
"You, Langdu Ram?" asked Tikia. "You can't even run. How will you play?"
"I...I can be the goalkeeper," Langdu said looking hopefully at Anand who nodded.

The day of the match was bright and sunny. The residents of the campus as well as the Angad Basti had gathered in large numbers.

The whistle blew and the game started with the supporters of both sides cheering their teams. Sartaj got hold of the ball and shot ahead. Bailu was after him in a flash. But Sartaj was too quick for him. He raced past the centre-half, tackled the full back and took a shot at the goal. Before poor Langdu realized what had happened, the ball whizzed over his head.
"Goal!" screamed the MCC supporters.
By half-time, the MCC had scored two more goals.
During break, Anand gave them a pep talk.
"Boys, you seem to be overawed by your opponents. They are good but you are better. Your problem is you are playing
not to lose. You should play to win. Forget about the score just go out and play your heart out. Attack them. But don't give up."

When the game resumed, Tikia passed the ball to Bailu who charged. He dribbled past three defenders and gave the ball to Raja who had raced ahead. Raja tackled a full back and passed it on to Bailu who slammed it in with all his might. The ball whizzed over the goalkeeper's shoulder into the goal.

The Angad Avatars were ecstatic. This was the break they were waiting for. Fully charged they kept attacking. Five minutes before the long whistle the score was three all. The MCC players were now getting tired while the Angad Avatars seemed fresh and enthusiastic.

Just then the MCC was awarded a penalty.

Sartaj ran in at an angle and at the last minute turned and kicked the ball in the opposite direction. Langdu jumped in the air like an ape and deflected the ball over the goalpost. However, he lost his balance and landed in a heap on the ground on his leg. He tried getting up but could not and was led off the ground. Angad Avatars were now left with only ten players.

Bailu once again got the ball and rushed straight to the goal with more than half the team in hot pursuit. He sprinted ahead and there was only the goalkeeper between him and victory. As he raised his leg to strike he suddenly tripped and fell on his face. He looked. Sartaj had tripped him and had passed the ball to Peter who was racing back with the ball. It was apparent that the referee had not seen a thing.

"Stop him," Bailu shouted, getting up and hobbling after Peter who was now nearing the goal. Javed who was the substitute goalkeeper, was no match for Peter who dribbled past him and gently flicked the ball into the goal.
A prize distribution function had been organized and the chief guest was Osman Ali, the Managing Director of Minerva Foods.

"I am thankful to young Sartaj for inviting me to this exciting match. Sartaj is keen that my company sponsor the MCC for the coming football tournament. Well, after seeing the match today, I have decided Minerva Foods will sponsor a team," he said and paused.

Sartaj and his teammates started hugging and congratulating each other.

"And the name of the team which we will sponsor is Angad Avatars," completed Osman Ali.

Bailu, Tikia and Anand looked at each other in amazement.

"Yes, my friends, the MCC players were good, no doubt. However, they were far better equipped to play and were also aided by foul play. I saw clearly what Sartaj did to the centre-forward of the Avatars. Moreover, for the MCC the match was merely a game, an opportunity to make fun of their less privileged friends. But to the Avatars it was not a game, it was a mission. They played with a passion, a commitment which is very rare in today's youngsters, but it is very essential if you want to excel in sports. So I have decided that Minerva Foods will be the official sponsors of the Angad Avatars. We will give them a ground to practice; each player will get shoes, dress, a proper diet and a stipend. And Anand will be the coach of the team."

Anand had tears in his eyes as he hugged Bailu, Tikia, Raja and others.
Sport is an activity though done for pleasure, requires physical effort, appropriate skill, sheer hard work and a strong will to win. It helps in all-round development of an individual. It teaches discipline and tolerance, and inculcates healthy competition. The collection of stories aims to inspire children to play the game in the spirit of the game.