

The Winning Serve



By Emily Cameron

Dedicated to Coach Young

“Alright, who’s ready for our first volleyball game?”

Warm shafts of sun shine streamed down from a cloudless blue sky, dancing across the blacktop in a pattern of golden light. I blinked against the sharp rays and focused on my volleyball coach, Mr. Young, as he gave a brief talk to our players. My stomach churned with nervousness and excitement, and my heart pounded with anxious anticipation. Today was my team’s first official volleyball game against another school!

I glanced up at the opposing team nearby, huddled together as their coach lectured them before the game. I couldn’t help noticing how scrawny and small our players seem compared to their massive, tough-looking players. Swallowing my nervousness, I turned my attention back to Coach Young. He gave us the usual lecture about “teamwork and sportsmanship,” and how we shouldn’t worry about winning. “We should be friendly and encouraging towards the other team, and we should always cheer for the players, alright?”

There were several halfhearted mutters of agreement from our team, but mostly we exchanged nervous glances, too anxious about the game to speak. Mr. Young gave a brief nod to the other coach, and the two teams marched out to the volleyball court. We scrambled to our positions on one side of the net, and those team members who weren’t currently playing the game stood along the sidelines. I found a spot on the court and faced the opposing players.

Our team served first. The referee’s whistle rang shrilly through the air as a boy, Nick, stepped up to the serving position. Drawing back an arm, he slammed his wrist into the volleyball with a loud smack. The ball whizzed over the net, and a girl on the other team bumped it skillfully back over. A boy on our side hit it back, and for several heartbeats the volleyball sailed back and forth over the net as the two teams bumped it to each other. Finally, the ball bounced onto the ground on the other side, and our team erupted into cheers and whoops. A point for us!

It was Nick’s turn to serve again. Face creased with determination, he slapped his wrist into the volleyball and watched as it swooped over the net. Leaping forward, a girl on the other team smashed her hand into the ball and sent it back over. Our team scrambled to hit it, but it fell to the ground before anyone could bump it. The opposing players cheered.

Now it was the other team’s turn to serve. Narrowing my eyes against the blinding sunlight, I watched a girl swung back her arm and serve the ball cleanly over the net. With a jolt, I realized the ball was heading right to me! Springing forward, I

slammed my wrists into the ball as hard as I could, and blinked in surprise as it flew back over the net and landed on the ground on the other side. My team whooped and cheered, and a girl rushed forward quickly to give me a high-five. Maybe I wasn't the best volleyball player, but I had scored a point for my team!

It was my team's turn to serve again. A girl stepped up to the serving place and timidly held out the ball in front of her. Swinging back an arm, she smacked her fist into the ball, but she hit it clumsily and it fell to the ground. I heard several snickers from the other team, and I glared through the net at them. How could they laugh at us when they weren't much better themselves?

Then it was the other team's turn to serve. I watched a boy smack his open palm into the volleyball and it sailed over the net. A boy on my team flung himself forward and bumped the ball back over. A girl on the other side slapped her wrists into it, sending it flying to our team. A boy hit it back, and it bounced to the ground on the other side before anyone could bump it. My team erupted into cheers; we had earned that point.

The game continued on and on, until Coach Young shouted out, "Game point!" Glancing at the scoreboard, I found that both teams had exactly twenty-four points each. Whichever side reached twenty-five points would win. Then, with horror, I suddenly realized that it was my turn to serve. I swallowed a wave of anxiety welling up inside me; I knew I wasn't exactly the best volleyball player, and I was nervous about serving. What if my serve was clumsy and it didn't make it over the net? Not only would it be embarrassing, it would be a real disappointment to my team because the other team would receive a point and they would win.

I stepped up to the serving place, clutching the volleyball that was rolled to me. There were several encouraging cheers from my team, but I could hardly hear them through the thudding of my heart. The pressure pushed down on my shoulders, as though I could actually feel the weight of the suspense. If I didn't serve this ball over the net, we would lose.

Struggling to breathe against the waves of nervousness crashing down on me, I bounced the ball twice on the ground, and then held the ball out in front of me. I drew back my arm and hesitated for a heartbeat. Then I smashed my fist as hard as I could into the ball with a loud smack. I watched in disbelief as the ball soared into the air and flew cleanly over the net, dropping onto the ground on the other side.

For a moment, there was complete silence. Had we won so easily? Then my team erupted into cheers and whoops, swarming around me and hugging me. I

blinked as my best friend, Jennifer, rushed up to give me a strong squeeze. “You did it, Emily!” she cried. “You saved us!”

Through the mass of overjoyed heads, I saw my coach staring at me with glowing approval. “That was an amazing serve, Emily,” he remarked fondly. I barely managed to nod my thanks, overwhelmed with relief and excitement. I had done it! I had saved the volleyball game!