

The Boy Who Didn't Want to Catch

by Michael Stahl



David was a good boy. He had a flock of friends, a 94% average in school, and always ate dinner with his family in the dining room, where he practiced good manners. David never talked back to his elders. He always respected their wisdom. Like most teenage boys, he enjoyed going for pizza and ice cream with his friends; he even relished studying history lessons out of his textbook. The thing David liked to do most though was play baseball. And he was an outstanding player, too.

David was only in tenth grade, but he was the starting left fielder on the varsity baseball team. Usually, sophomores would play on the junior varsity team and take time to get ready to play with the older kids, but David was so advanced that the coach of the varsity team, Coach Adams, welcomed him onto the advanced squad.

David did not take playing on the varsity team for granted. Because he was the youngest kid on the team, he knew he needed to put in extra effort just to compete with his teammates. Coach Adams recognized David's desire and ability and would often tell the rest of the players to follow David's example. One day though, an unfortunate event created a conflict for David like none other before.

It was a warm, sunny Tuesday afternoon and the Woodside High School Woodchucks, David's team, were practicing at a nearby park. David was out in his usual spot, left field, tossing a baseball back and forth with Caesar, the center fielder. Suddenly, they heard a cry of pain coming from the other side of the diamond. Sammy, their catcher, hurt his ankle while practicing his handling of wild pitches. The rest of Sammy's teammates quickly surrounded him, while Coach Adams picked him up and helped Sammy walk over to a bench. Sammy struggled with the short walk; he could barely put any weight on his left leg. Still, fighting back tears, Sammy told the team, "I'll be alright. I'm not going to miss Friday's game." That was just like Sammy. He was a tough guy, which was exactly the reason he played catcher for the Woodchucks.

Coach Adams cancelled the rest of practice because he had to drive Sammy to the hospital where Sammy's parents would be waiting. David, like the rest of his teammates, was very upset. They went to the pizzeria together to talk about the incident.

"Do you really think Sammy will be able to play this Friday?" asked Caesar at one point. "It's an important game. We're going to need him."

Caesar was not exaggerating. The Woodchucks were having a good season, winning eleven out of twelve games, but were only in second place. The Barons of Rockefeller High had won all of their games, including their first one against the Woodchucks. The Barons slaughtered the Woodchucks 13-1. In that game, David failed to get a hit-the only time that had happened all season. David wanted to beat the Barons badly, just as everyone else did. If the Woodchucks would be victorious, they'd be tied for first place with only three games remaining in the regular season.

The next morning, David was sitting at his desk in homeroom.

"Did you hear the news?" asked Tyler, who sat in front of David and was the younger brother of Corey, the senior starting pitcher of the Woodchucks.

"What news?" replied David, who had turned off his phone early last night to study for his History exam.

"I sent you a text," said Tyler. "Sammy severely sprained his ankle. Corey called him last night. It doesn't look like Sammy is going to play for the rest of the season."

David was shocked. He knew Sammy had hurt himself, but also knew Sammy's reputation. The catcher of any baseball team has to work really hard and go through grueling practices, not to mention the games themselves. Catchers have to be able to crouch down to catch all those pitches. They have to think of pitching strategies to get the other team's batters out. If a batter hits a groundball, catchers must run up the first base line along with the batter, just in case an infielder accidentally throws the ball too far from the first baseman. The catcher is there to back up his teammate. Catchers have to take off all of their equipment in the dugout-the chest protector, the mask, and the shin guards that have so many buckles and straps-when it is their turn to bat. Fielding and batting was hard enough even without all of those extra duties! Sammy was so strong, such a hard worker, and very tough. David simply could not comprehend that Sammy would miss any game, especially a game as important as the one against the Barons that coming Friday.

Later that day, at the start of baseball practice, Coach Adams pulled David aside and asked to speak to him.

"The team needs you to be the catcher this Friday," Coach Adams told David. "We might need you to catch the rest of the season too."

"Are you serious?" asked David. He almost never questioned adults, but this time, he could not hold back his surprise.

Coach Adams explained that David would be the best choice because he was the hardest worker on the team. Even though he had no experience being a catcher, Coach Adams was confident he was the one player who could handle it. After all, he had tried so hard to play on a team with the older kids, and had succeeded in doing so.

"Well, Coach, whatever you think is best for the team," David said. However, David did not really want to play catcher. He only agreed to it because of the lessons his parents taught him about respecting adults, especially coaches. In David's mind though, he thought playing catcher would be too difficult for him and the rest of the team would suffer as a result.

David went into the dugout to put on the entire heavy catcher's gear. As he walked toward home plate, he saw Corey, Friday's starting pitcher and their best, waiting for him on the pitcher's mound. Coach Adams stood close by watching.

"Don't worry, David," shouted Corey. "You're going to be fine. We'll work on everything we need together. That's what teammates are for."

"That's right!" agreed Coach Adams.

David appreciated the words of support, but stayed quiet. He was too worried about his new position and the big game against the Barons to speak.

When David woke up the next morning, his legs were so sore that he was having trouble walking. He thought to himself, "This is a bad idea."

David went through the day tired. He got his History test back from his teacher with a score of 100%, which made him feel a little bit better about missing all of those texts from his teammates about Sammy two nights before, but did nothing to help his knees.

At practice that afternoon, while putting on the catcher's equipment, David heard a voice call out to him. "Hey! There's my replacement!" It was Sammy coming towards him on crutches. David was glad to see him in such good spirits.

"How are you feeling today?" Sammy asked David.

"Tired. And sore," replied David with a groan.

Sammy laughed and told David that was not surprising at all.

"You'll feel better tomorrow," insisted Sammy. "Believe me. I know."

David said he'd hoped so. Tomorrow was the game against the Barons! Sammy could see the worry in David's eyes and could hear it in his voice too.

"Listen, kid," began Sammy, who was two years older than David. "The team needs you to do this."

Coach Adams didn't pick your name out of a hat to be the new catcher. You're the one player on this team who could do this with me being hurt. The fact that you even made the team as our starting left fielder as a sophomore showed how hard you're willing to work. I saw that; Corey did too. Not to mention Coach Adams and everyone else."

David began to understand what was most important. It wasn't just the results. It was how hard one worked to achieve those results.

David got through practice that Thursday and, sure enough, just as Sammy said, David felt ready to go Friday. He just needed to get used to crouching a little bit.

Corey, the starting pitcher, was obviously ready to go too. He pitched the best game of the year, telling David throughout the game that David was giving him excellent choices of pitches to throw.

The Woodchucks beat the Barons 3-0, tying them for first place, and they scored their three runs all because of the home run Derek hit in the sixth inning. Derek took David's place that day in left field.

After the game, David was the happiest of all the Woodchucks, even though he did not get a hit. David knew that a big reason for the team's victory was that he agreed to be the catcher. From then on, he loved playing catcher because he could help the Woodchucks win in ways he never could before.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What position did David normally play for the varsity baseball team?

- A. right fielder
- B. pitcher
- C. left fielder
- D. catcher

2. What conflict does David face in the story?

- A. Coach Adams moved David to the junior varsity baseball team after David failed to get a hit in the last game against the Barons.
- B. Coach Adams welcomed David on the varsity baseball team even though David was only a sophomore.
- C. David is asked to play left fielder in the big game against the Barons even though he actually wants to play catcher.
- D. David is asked to play catcher in the big game against the Barons even though he doesn't want to play catcher.

3. "However, David did not really want to play catcher. He only agreed to it because of the lessons his parents taught him about respecting adults, especially coaches. In David's mind though, he thought playing catcher would be too difficult for him and the rest of the team would suffer as a result."

What can be concluded about how David feels based on this evidence?

- A. David was beginning to question the lessons his parents taught him about respecting adults.
- B. David feared he would not be a good catcher and would hurt the team's chances of winning as a result.
- C. David was annoyed that he had to practice being a catcher even though he really liked being the left fielder.
- D. David was certain he would help his team win the game even though being catcher would be too difficult for him.

4. How did the Woodchucks team benefit when David played catcher?

- A. David played so well as catcher on the Woodchucks team that the team was able to easily beat the Barons.
- B. Other players on the Woodchucks team had to work even harder to make up for the bad way David played as catcher.
- C. Other players on the Woodchucks team had the chance to play really well because of David's new position.
- D. The Woodchucks team was able to beat the Barons because of the number of hits David got.

5. What is the main theme of this story?

- A. the importance of baseball in a young man's life
- B. the importance of moving on after loss
- C. the drawbacks of being motivated by fear
- D. the importance and benefits of helping a group

6. Read the sentence: "Like most teenage boys, he enjoyed going for pizza and ice cream with his friends; he even **relished** studying history lessons out of his textbook. The thing David liked to do most though was play baseball."

What does the word "**relished**" mean as used in this sentence?

- A. enjoyed
- B. detested
- C. consumed
- D. achieved

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ David initially did not want to play catcher, David knew that a big reason for the Woodchucks' victory was that he agreed to be the catcher.

- A. Although
- B. Because
- C. Instead
- D. However

8. Why does Coach Adams ask David to play catcher?

9. Describe the two ways David's position as catcher influenced the performance of other players on the Woodchucks team. Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

10. The author states that David loved playing catcher because "he could help the Woodchucks win in ways he never could before." In what ways can David help the team win in ways he never could before? Use information from the story to support your answer.
