

S.O.R. LOSERS

WRITTEN BY AVI : ILLUSTRATED BY TIMOTHY BUSH

Chapter Two: The Games Begin!

a breakfast serials story

THE STORY SO FAR : *South Orange River Middle School has created a special seventh-grade soccer team for a bunch of guys who have no interest in sports. Ed Sitrow, unwillingly designated goaltender, tells what happens.*

The ride to Buckingham Junior High's soccer field the next day was strange. We were not the only team going. Two other soccer teams, our regular eighth-grade team as well as the sixth-grade team, were on the bus. Everyone sat with their own group. The other kids were all moody, worried, like they were playing the game in their heads. As for us, we were relaxed, looking out windows, telling jokes, talking about this and that. I mean nobody wanted to even think about what was going to happen.

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Then, when we arrived, the other kids jumped to their feet all excited, with lots of laughing, shouting, pounding each other on backs, like they wanted to get out. Now it was our turn to sit moody and glum.

The bus driver turned around and looked at us. We were the only ones left. "Hey, guys, this is it."

"Can't we go to the next stop?" asked Porter.

The bus driver thought the remark was a joke. We didn't.

So it was that on a chilly, gray September afternoon we stepped from the bus and slouched toward the Buckingham field. The leaves were just beginning to turn. Our stomachs already had. Right then and there, I knew why I was opposed to capital punishment. I not only wanted to live, I firmly believed I was innocent.

We all were. Our only crime was that we didn't like sports much. Worse, we actually preferred other things. Not everything. Some things. For example, Saltz was keen on his writing, and only okay in biology. Lifsom was gung-ho about art, but his grades were generally just so-so.

Fairly normal. Or so we thought. Watching football, rooting for teams, stuff like that, just wasn't important to us.

True, Fenwick was a whiz at poker, and claimed that was a sport, but he didn't get much support. You'd think not being into sports was antihuman, or worse, un-American.

How? By the notion that playing sports isn't fun.

Fun. It reminded me of a class trip to the A.S.P.C.A. Someone asked a woman there if they ever had to kill an animal. "Oh, no," she said with a big smile, "we just put them into a long, long sleep."

After two practices, we could tell that we were heading into a long, long sleep.

When we got to the field, the Buckingham team was already lying in wait. Mr. Lester went to speak to the other coach. Maybe to warn him. As he left, he said, "Get yourselves ready."

Get ready? Get lost is what we wanted to do.

Out in the middle of the field, the referee was showing off, kicking the soccer ball up in the air with alternate feet and never once letting it touch the ground.

We watched.

"Think he's open to a bribe?" wondered Hays.

"Why not just get him for our team?" Saltz said.

"Do an exchange," offered Radosh. "We'll ref. He'll play."

"Sure," said Porter, "but then we'd have to know the rules."

Porter had a point.

Then we watched the Buckingham team. They were kicking the ball to each other as if it were on a guide wire.

"I think they know how to play," said Root, clearly upset by the possibility.

"Maybe we should ask for lessons, instead of a game," put in Dorman.

With that, we all started to laugh. And couldn't stop.

Mr. Lester hurried back. When he saw us in the midst of our fit, he got worried. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Root here," said Hays, "had this idea that we were going to play those guys. It broke us up."

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"Why, yes," said Mr. Lester, perfectly serious. "They are the opposing team."

"What are they, all-stars?" asked Eliscue.

"Oh, no," said Mr. Lester, alarmed. "It's their third-string seventh-grade team. Perhaps, gentlemen, you should warm up."

"When you're cold, you're cold," said Barish. It was such a bad joke we stopped laughing.

"Does everybody know what position he is playing?" asked Mr. Lester.

We did, sort of. During the second practice, book in hand, he had placed us around, but I wasn't sure of the position names, except goaltender.

"Now," said Mr. Lester, "remember the important thing is to . . ." Then, so help me, he forgot what he was going to say. But Mr. Lester was, if nothing else, prepared. Right off, he went to his pocket and pulled out some papers. Notes. "Ah, yes," he said, and began to read. "It's important to concentrate. Learn to meet the ball. And, gentlemen, the most important thing of all is—"

We never did learn the most important thing of all. The referee blew his whistle.

The Buckingham team gathered, their blue jerseys merging into a storm cloud. Out came a thunderous cheer.

If that cheer was meant to show us that, although a third-string team, they were real and strong and feeling victorious, that we had every reason to expect defeat, it worked.

"How about us doing a cheer?" suggested Mr. Lester.

"Shazam," said Lifsom. Not only was he the only one who said anything, it didn't work. We were still us.

We sort of backed onto the field. Lifsom, who was playing up front in the middle, shook hands with the opposite Buckingham players. Maybe they decided to be nice to us. Anyway, it was our ball for starters.

As for myself, I was strolling around in the goal area trying to remember everything I knew about the rules, which wasn't much. How far could I go? I felt certain I could kick the

ball, but on second thought, as well as third through seventh, I wasn't sure. Was I allowed to touch the ball with my hands or just my elbows? Did knees count? Things like that.

In fact, I was pacing along the newly chalked goal lines, with my back to the field, when the whistle blew. I looked up, wondering what had gone wrong. What had gone wrong was, the game had begun.

Now, the way it works, I think, or is supposed to work, is that Lifsom, being up front and middle, sort of kicks the ball back toward our side—at the moment it was Barish who was behind him—and away we would go.

But to give you a full sense of how the game went, all I can say is that somewhere, somehow, between the time the ball touched Lifsom's foot—I think it was his foot, because, as I said, I hadn't been watching—and the time it was supposed to reach Barish, Buckingham had already stolen the ball.

They didn't just steal it. They kept it. Forever. When I looked up, I saw this wall of storm-blue shirts rolling down the field, in my direction!

To be continued...

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