

THE 'LITTLEST' TIGER

By

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Little Joe sat on the bench, watching the boys.

He wanted to play ball with them, but they only laughed, and said, "Aw, go on, Joe. You're too little."

Joe didn't argue. He WAS too little to argue with them, but not too little to play baseball. He knew that for sure. So, he just sat, beating his fist into his glove, the shiny new glove, bought with money earned from his paper route. He scuffed his tennis shoes back and forth in the dirt under the bench.

A car pulled up to the curb. Mr. James, the coach and his son, Bud got out. The boys ran to meet them. Bud was pitcher for the Tigers, best in the Little League. Everybody said so. Each time there was a write-up in the paper about the Tigers. Bud's name was mentioned.

"Hey, boys," Mr. James called out, "come on and get the gear out of the car."

The boys gathered around, and as the car trunk was unlocked, they grabbed the bases, the catcher's gear, and the bats and balls. Joe elbowed his way in and helped

one of the boys carry the water keg to the bench. As they set it on the bench, Joe felt a hand on his shoulder.

He looked up. Mr. James smiled down at him. "Are you going to play ball, Joe?"

Joe grinned a sideways grin. "I don't know, Sir. The boys say I'm too little. Guess I am kinda little, but I can catch a ball real good, and I can run right fast. Could I, please, Mr. James? Could I?"

Mr. James laughed and playfully pushed Joe's cap over his eyes. "If you think you are big enough, more than likely you are. We'll see, Joe. We'll just see."

Joe shoved his cap back. "Gosh, Mr. James, that would be super, if only I could!"

"On the bench, boys. We have some things to go over before practice." Mr. James clapped his hands and the boys fell onto the bench. Joe scooted onto the very end of the bench.

"Now, Bill, what happened yesterday when the runner was caught off second base, and the pitcher threw the ball to you." Mr. James asked.

Bill looked down at the ground, and mumbled, "I guess I wasn't looking, Sir. When Bud threw the ball, I wasn't ready. The runner stole to third:"

"That's right, Bill. Now what is the first rule of the game? Let's hear it loud and clear!"

In unison, the boys shouted, "Be Alert!"

"Right," agreed Mr. James. "No day dreaming, no sky gazing, no bird watching and no clod kicking. Alertness can win the game. Alright, let's practice!"

Bud and the catcher went to one side and started throwing the ball back and forth. Mr. James began pitching to other boys, one after the other. They each took a turn at batting. While the boys waited, Mr. James would pitch a ball to any one of them, testing their alertness and their catching ability. They, in turn, would throw it back to him. Joe stood, awaiting his turn. The ball was pitched to Phil, the boy closest to him. Phil was a good ball player, but he had a tendency to 'grandstand', reaching for the ball with only one hand. Mr. James insisted they use both hands.

Reaching out with his gloved hand, he missed. Joe was ready. He stepped to the side, stretched, and smack, right into both hands. He fired it back quickly. Phil stared at Joe in complete surprise.

"Atta Boy, Joe", Mr. James exclaimed. You stung my hand through the glove. He looked at Joe and winked. Now, let's see if you can bat".

Joe watched the ball coming over the plate, and took a wicked swing at it. Missed! He tried three more times. Missed!

"Well", we'll have to work on the hitting a little bit. It will come'', Mr. James said. Joe was disappointed that he didn't hit, but he was excited because he would get to be one of the Tigers anyhow. From that day on, he was indeed, one of the Tigers. He was even issued a shirt with the official insignia of the Tigers on it. He bent the bill of his cap the same as the other boys. He was eager for a real game, even though he worried about his batting. His chance came three days later.

They were to play the Ravens. He told his mother and dad. They promised they would be there. His dad threw the ball every evening until sundown, but Joe would hit only about every tenth one.

The big day arrived. Mr. James called the boys together. "We are going to make a few changes. Phil, you take right field. Larry, you move to first base. Joe, you take the short stop position. You throw a good ball, but the field is a bit far. Okay, boys, looks like the other team is here. Let's go"!

Joe did well in the short stop position, but he didn't get a hit. Still, the Tigers won.

"It was a good game, boys," said Mr. James. "Let's win the one coming up next Friday. Now, to the rootbeer stand."

As Joe sat in the car with his dad on the way home, he played the game over and over in his mind. He knew he had done well his first game, except when he was up to bat. If he could only hit! He talked to his dad at the dinner table that night.

"Don't worry, Son," his dad said. "You will hit eventually. Just don't panic. Keep your eye on the ball from the time it leaves the pitcher's hand."

Joe felt better, but he wasn't sure. Every time he saw it barreling down at him, his knees would begin to shake, and then the bat would shake. Sometimes he did connect but it was usually a foul. He could run, he could catch, and he could throw. He just had to be a hitter!

It was finally Friday; the big game was in full swing. The score was three to two, bottom of the ninth. The Tigers were down one point. Larry was at bat. He hit a pop fly right into the pitcher's glove. Phil walked to the plate. Two outs already. They needed a hit.

"Watch 'em close, Phil," Mr. James called out. "Make him pitch to you, boy."

The first ball came over and missed the plate barely an inch. "Ball!" the umpire yelled.

The second ball came screaming over the plate and Phil took a good firm swing. Kerplack! The ball sailed out over the short stop's head. The second baseman ran for it, but it was too far gone. The center fielder ran in. The ball took one bounce, and was in his glove. He threw to second, and the second baseman shot it to first, but Phil was already on first base.

The Tigers went wild. Parents were jumping up and down. One hit could bring the runner on around, maybe to score, and tie up the game. Joe was up. He stepped to the plate, and a rumble passed over the bench. The boys liked Joe, but he couldn't hit. They looked at Mr. James, anxiously, hoping he would send in a pinch hitter.

Mr. James was struggling with his conscience, wanting to do just that, but at the risk of losing the game, Joe had to have his chance.

Joe glanced nervously at Mr. James for the signal that would send him to the bench. It didn't come. He choked

up on the bat. He had to do it! The ball came over the inside corner. "Stee-rike," the umpire bellowed.

Again the ball came over. Joe watched it. It was low. He let it go. "Ball." yelled the umpire. Joe's breath came out in little puffs.

The next ball was good. Joe knew it was good, but he couldn't get the feel of the bat. It felt as if it weighed a ton. He swung late. "Stee-rike!"

"Come on, Joe," the boys cheered him on. Joe was tense, all tied in knots. He glanced at Mr. James. No way out!

The ball came flying, right over the plate. He gave it his best shot. "Foul," called the umpire. The next ball was right there, and Joe swung as hard as he could. He swung high. It was all over. The Tigers lost. "Not the Tigers," thought Joe. "I lost." The boys were gathering up the gear. Joe couldn't look at them. He was fighting back the tears. "Good try, Joe," said Mr. James. "Maybe next time." But Joe wondered if there would be a next time. He just wasn't good enough. That night in his room, he cried. When he said his prayers he prayed that he would get one more chance. He prayed that he could hit the ball. He had let everybody down.

All day Saturday he practiced, trying to hit the balls his dad pitched to him. His dad knew if he finally really connected, he would have the feel of it, and everything would fall into place. They knocked off for awhile when his dad suggested they go for a soda at the drugstore.

"It isn't the end of the world, Son," said his dad. "A lot of ball players can't hit too well, but they make up for it in other ways. I played some ball in high-school and I remember one guy who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn until the coach- - -" His dad stopped. He suddenly grabbed Joe by the arm. "Come on, forget that soda. I have an idea. Yes sir, a real humdinger. It just might work."

They practiced until dark that day, and every day after regular practice the following week. Joe's dad called Mr. James

and told him what they were up to. At regular practice Joe either fouled or struck out. His dad had warned him to keep silent.

The big day, Friday, was again at hand. It was the game that would tell the tale, determine which team would go to the State Tournament. The Tigers and the Cougars were tied for first place.

The game was the most exciting of the season. The score seesawed back and forth, each team doing well each time it was up to bat. The top half of the last inning, the score was seven to six in favor of the Tigers. They had to hold that lead. The Cougars were up.

"Hold 'em, Bud," Mr. James shouted. "Look alive out there guys!"

The pressure was on, and Bud struck the first two batters out. One, two, just like that! Suddenly the third batter connected with a bad pitch and the Tigers fell apart. At the end of the top half, the Cougars were two ahead.

The tigers rallied at the bench. Two scores would tie the game, three would win. They had to have three! The bottom half got under way. The spectators, mothers, dads, sisters, brothers and grandparents sat on the edge of their chairs lined up along the sidelines.

Bud was up first. He plowed into the first pitch. The ball went high out toward center field. Almost a home run. He skidded around the bases; held up at third. The crowd roared. So it went. Larry hit a two bagger.

Bud scored. Bill struck out. On down the line. Phil got on. Larry and Phil were the winning runs waiting to happen.

A sacrifice by Steve and Larry scored. The game was tied up. Two outs! AND then, Joe was up. The Tigers looked at Mr. James. Surely he would send in a pinch hitter this time.

Mr. James whispered to Joe. Joe walked to the plate, leaned over, rubbed his hands with dirt and took his stance. The crowd was silent.

The Cougar pitcher smiled as he eyed the little batter. "This will be a cinch." he muttered. "Get it down to him," the coach yelled.

The pitcher nodded his head and went into his wind-up. The ball came slow and low, right for the center of the plate. At the last moment, Joe quickly shifted position, stepped in front of the plate, and held his bat horizontally in front of him. The ball connected with the bat, and he gave it a gentle bunt. It dribble^d out about eight feet in front of him and he sped down the base line on flying feet. He fell onto first base, stood up, and planted one foot firmly on the bag.

The Tigers went wild. Phil scored while the Cougars fumbled and scrambled for the ball. The Tigers had won!

It was Phil who first reached Joe, who was still planted firmly at first base. He grabbed his arms, and jumped up and down. By then the rest of the team were there, and they hoisted him high in the air, and carried him back to the bench. Mr. James was there. His dad was there. They were grinning at him, and he grinned back. "Are we going for a rootbeer?" he asked.

"You bet we are," said Mr. James, "and we will drink a toast to our secret weapon, our bunter, who helped get us to the State Tournament! We are going to be dynamite. Right?"

The End