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the WEAKEST LINK



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Published by: Instytut Matki i Dziecka

Translated by: Anna Gordzialska i Magdalena Sikon

ISBN: 978-83-88767-83-8

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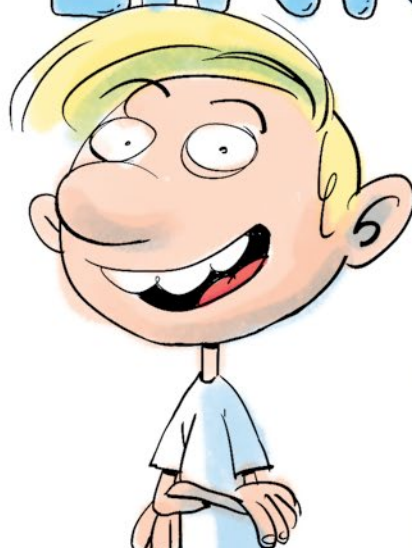
The publication is financed by the European Commission within the Erasmus + Program. The publication has been funded with the financial support of the European Commission. The publication reflects only the views of its authors and the European Commission and the Erasmus + Program National Agency are not responsible for its essential content.

FREE PUBLICATION



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The chain is as strong as its weakest link. It's not me who invented this, it's just the way it is. The fact that I'm 12 and know such things only proves that I'm a clever man. Broad-minded. Although lately I've had only one thing on my mind, the cup for the first place in the interschool football tournament. If you thought that I am the captain of a school team, you can take a note that you are clever too. My name is Jacob, I became the captain already last year and I've been playing in the team since the fourth class, from the beginning as a centre forward. What else about me? I am a good student, maybe not the best one, but I never, never had to worry about promotion



to the next class though at the beginning of the school year I missed a lot of lessons. That's the way it was and there's no point in dwelling on why. Generally speaking I partly owe my good results in learning my parents who made a simple pact with me, i.e. as long as I have no problems with learning I can devote as much time to football as I want. A good pact, isn't it? It would be the most stupid thing to ruin it. So I'm not studying myself to death to get 6 or 5 – solid 4 or sometimes even 3, which cannot be moved by anything in the world is really enough for me to have a chance to improve the strike above the wall right into the top corner of the goal or dribbling between cones. And since I became the captain I've been training even more – I have to be a good example for the boys. How could I demand from them training really hard if I trained at half throttle myself? Last year I found out that my approach to the matter is right. Our team reached higher level and for the first time in the history we qualified for the cup stage. We were so close to the quarter- final. We were eliminated after a series of penalty kicks which, as every football fan



knows, is a big lottery. In short, to gain the cup we lacked not qualifications but some luck. That's why my dream this year is to win the cup and it isn't just a fantasy but a real goal. A goal that is absolutely worth giving your all. Football is a team sport and that's why I believe you all understand why I take care not about the leaders or average players in our team but those who are the weakest. A team is like a chain, isn't it? And a chain:

'...is as strong as its weakest link', John rolled his eyes as if his head was spinning 'You've been repeating this to us since the beginning of the season.'

'Exactly', I took a chance to use his argument for my purpose. 'You should already know this.'

'But what does it have in common with us?', John still didn't understand. He looked at other boys. Their faces had similar expressions.

'What do you mean by 'what'? Even our worst players have to be in their top condition and that's what we have to take care about all the time.'

'Aren't they?' – John didn't give up.

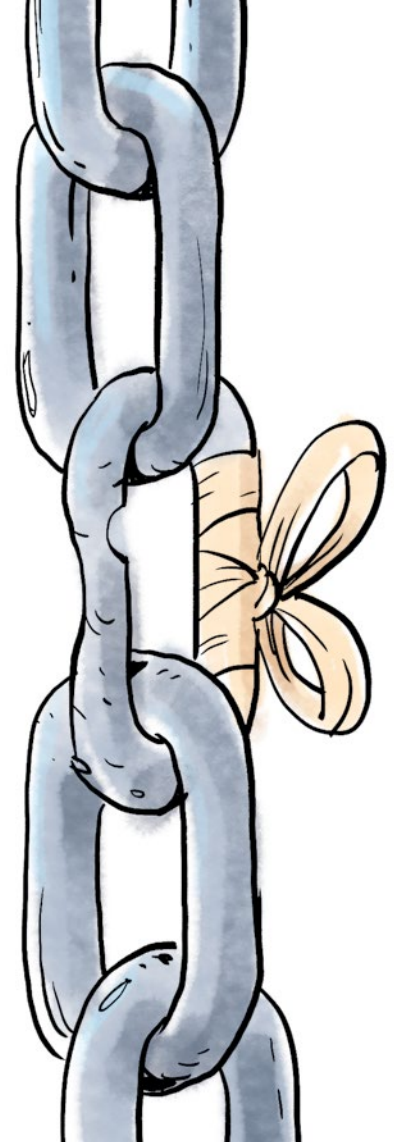
'They are.'

‘So where’s the problem?’, John spread his hands, ‘And what does it have in common with employing a new player?’

I slowly inhaled some air and a while later, even more slowly, exhaled it. Is it really necessary to explain obvious things? We can’t take anyone to our team. If we take somebody, this person has to strengthen us and not make us weaker. We don’t need players worse than the worst player we have, because even their presence in the line-up, even in the reserve, sets us back from achieving the goal. And our goal is clear- the cup is to be ours.

‘We just have to keep the standard if we want to win’- I said it as calmly as I could.

‘Victor is a school record-holder in sixty meters,’ insisted John, ‘In my opinion the level of our team would raise with him.’



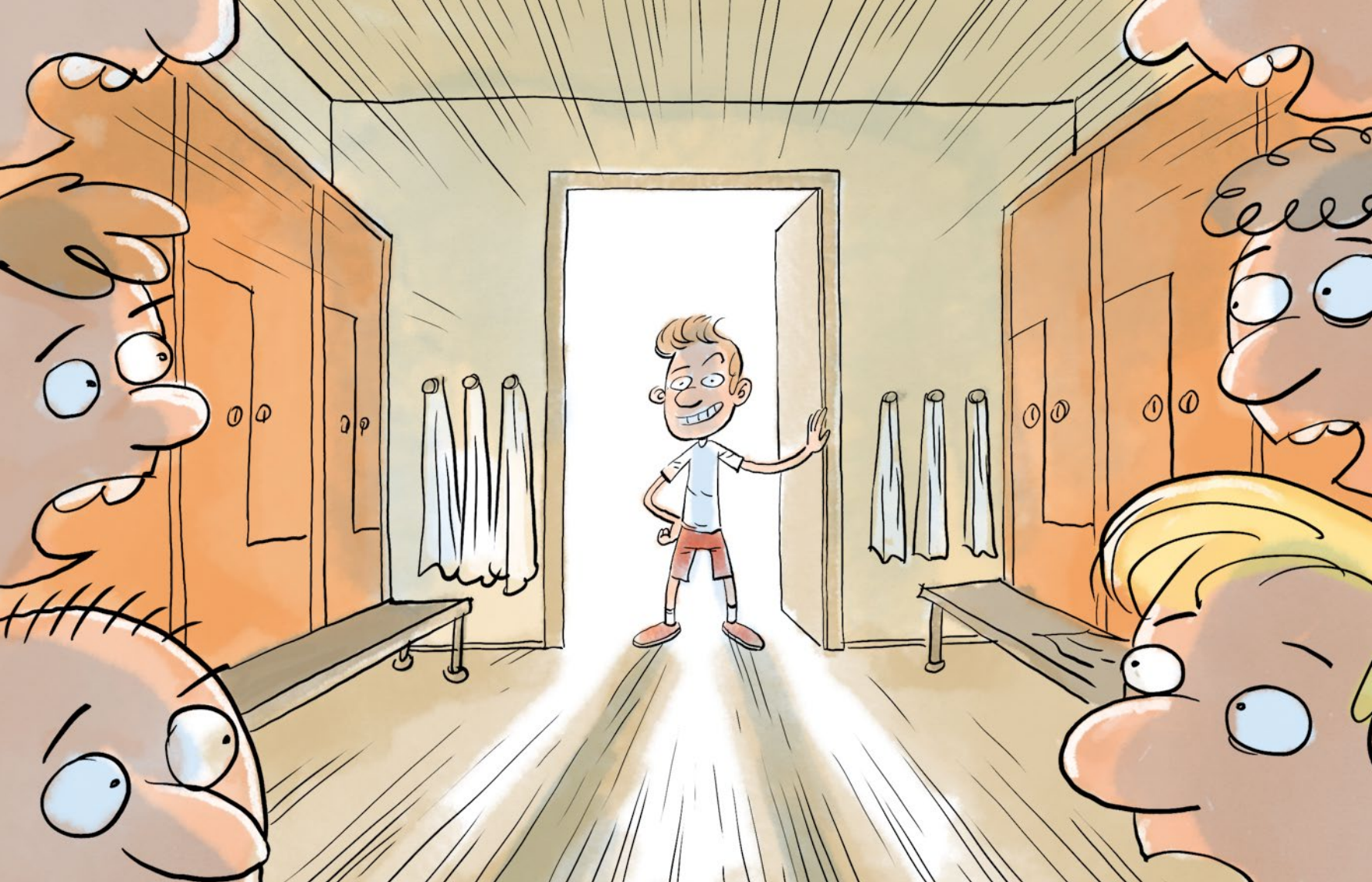
The rest of our team nodded their heads. I had to react quickly – it smelled as a riot on the deck and as a captain I couldn't let this happen. Not before the first match of the knockout stage (we left the group with a full set of points).

‘Then maybe he should take part in the sprint competition. Football is something more than just running fast. Besides, it matters how fast he can run with a ball by his leg.’

‘Not much slower’- everyone turned round towards the cloakroom entrance. Victor was standing in the door. He was the fifth class student, not really tall with thick shag of fair brown hair and a bowlegs. The last thing isn't really a big disadvantage, in fact there are many great football players who have their legs ‘straightened on a barrel’. I have to admit he has a nerve to walk like this into the council meeting.

‘For sure faster than anyone else in the present line-up. But you don't have to trust my word. Let's go to the field and you will check it yourself captain.’

I felt the weight of looks of all the boys on my back. Well if something sounds like a challenge, it usually is a challenge. I had to pick up the gauntlet.



‘Ok lets go to the field. But to make it clear,’ I tapped Victor into his arm with my finger, ‘There won’t be a second chance.’

‘Sure,’ Victor grinned like a Cheshire cat. God! This boy still has a lot of milk teeth and he wants to be in our team!

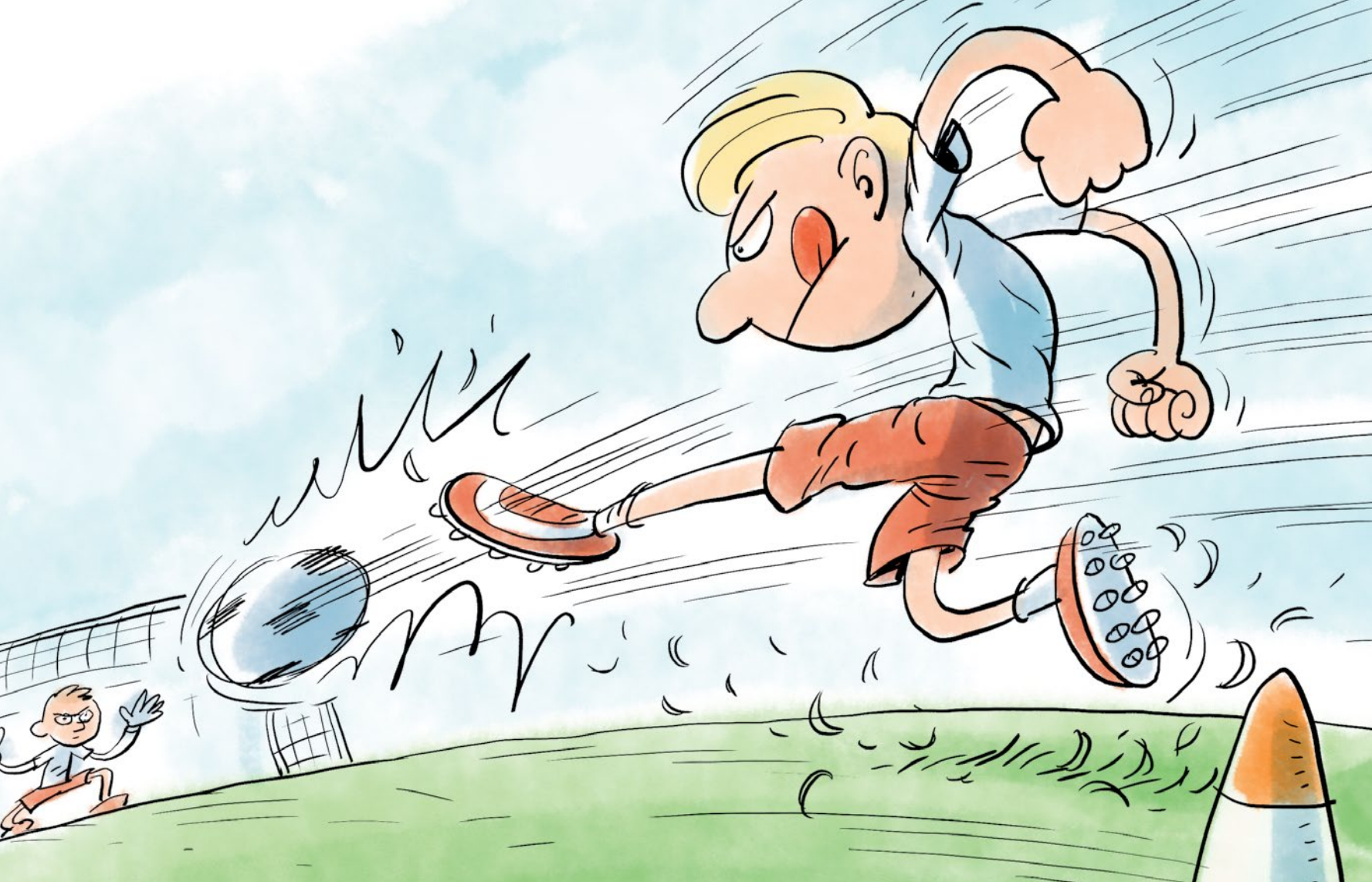
I put cones in the middle of the field and John did the same in the goal. First I showed what has to be done – I ran slalom between cones with a ball right next to my leg and then being on the straight line, I kicked the ball as strong as I could. The ball flapped in the goal.

‘Your turn,’ I said to Victor. Surprisingly the boy didn’t look scared at all.

‘Go!’ I shouted and turned on the timer.

Victor was running as fast as a devil. He almost skimmed the cones while passing them by! Where did he learn to play like this? Immediately after passing the last cone he kicked the ball. He wasn’t as powerful as I was but he span

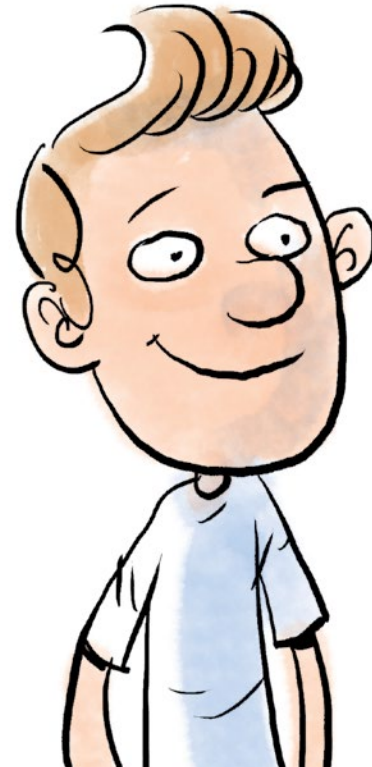


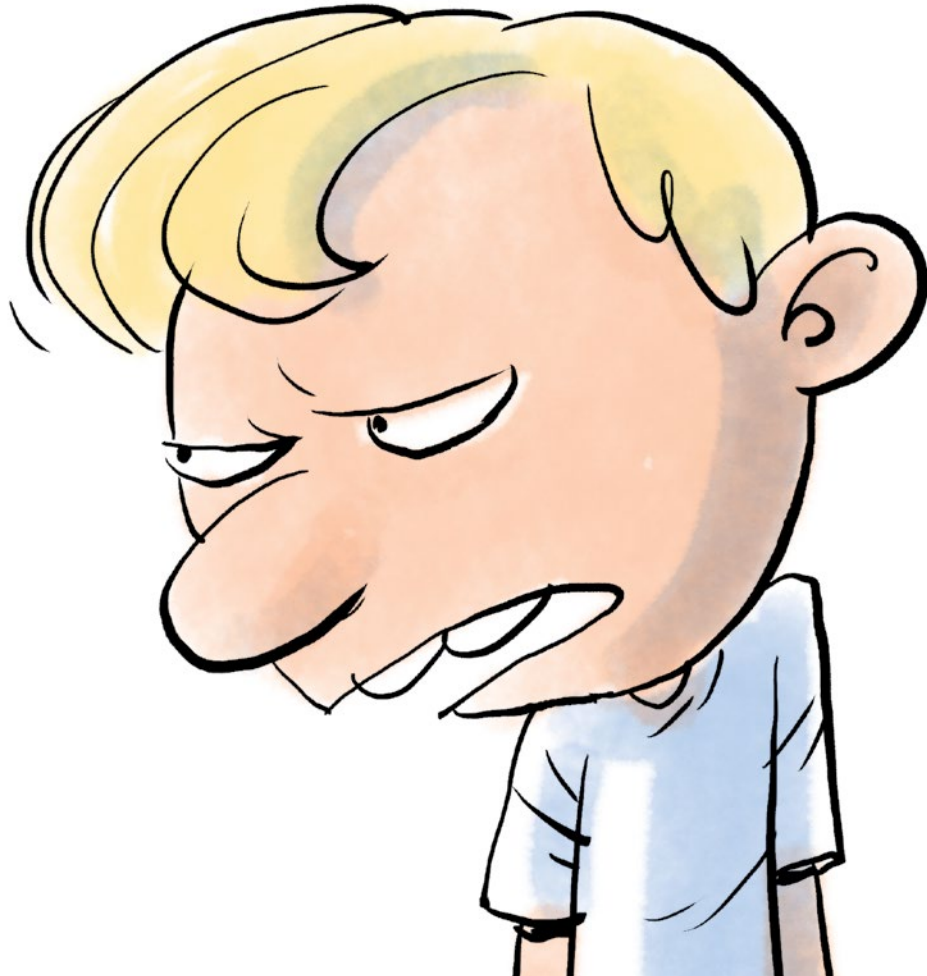


the ball in such a way that it misled John and it fell into the gate. I checked the timer.

‘What do you think, captain?’ – Victor was looking at me challengingly. He ran the track, kicked and scored 5 seconds faster than me. It was absolutely the record of the team.

‘All right,’ I said and quickly restarted the timer before anyone could see his score. ‘Let’s see how you manage free kicks.’ I set a wall made of our defenders. The rules were clear- each of us was to kick 10 times. We made an agreement with John that for every goal passed by him he has to do 10 push-ups and each





time he defends successfully, the striker needs to do 10 push-ups. I scored 7 goals per ten shots and Victor scored 9. The boys cheered and hugged him as strong as they could. Even John who had a perspective of hard training coming soon.

‘So, we have a new striker!’ they were really happy, but I wasn’t.

‘You were lucky with those goals’ I said to him ‘However, you have to work on your strength, because in the real matches gentle shots won’t work’



I went back to the cloakroom. I took a shower and changed my clothes before the rest of the team came back. I didn't feel like talking. I just wanted to go home. Although I was walking fast I didn't even manage to go half the way when Victor caught me up. A fast munchkin I must admit.

'I heard what you said, that a team is like a chain...'

'Yhm' I moaned, because I didn't want to talk, but Victor didn't want to let me go.

'I think the same.'

'That's great. It's our philosophy. I mean that's how we think it should be organised,'

I added, because the fifth class student doesn't have to know what philosophy is.

'It's a pity that you don't use it,' Victor smiled but it wasn't a friendly smile at all. 'Cause how do you want to win the cup with a cripple as the only striker and the captain of the team?'

I stopped really shocked. Did he really say it? Victor was staring right into my face. My eyes melted. My stomach felt sick. My cheeks were burning with true fire. My breath was whistling.

‘What’s going on captain?’ Victor’s look was cool as a needle just taken out of a freezer. ‘Are you going to start shaking’? Will you have an attack? Should I call an ambulance?’

Victor spread his arms, twisted his lips and was shaking for a few seconds. When he stopped he hissed out:

‘I don’t know how it is possible that the rest of the team forgot about the fact that you suffer from epilepsy, but somebody has to remind them about this. Do you agree with me captain? Well, we have to know how strong is our weakest link.’



Victor chortled and then went away whistling happily. Where did he learn about my illness?! I've never had an attack at school. I haven't had an attack for two years! My illness is as doctors say fully stabilized. I can do everything, well almost everything that others do.

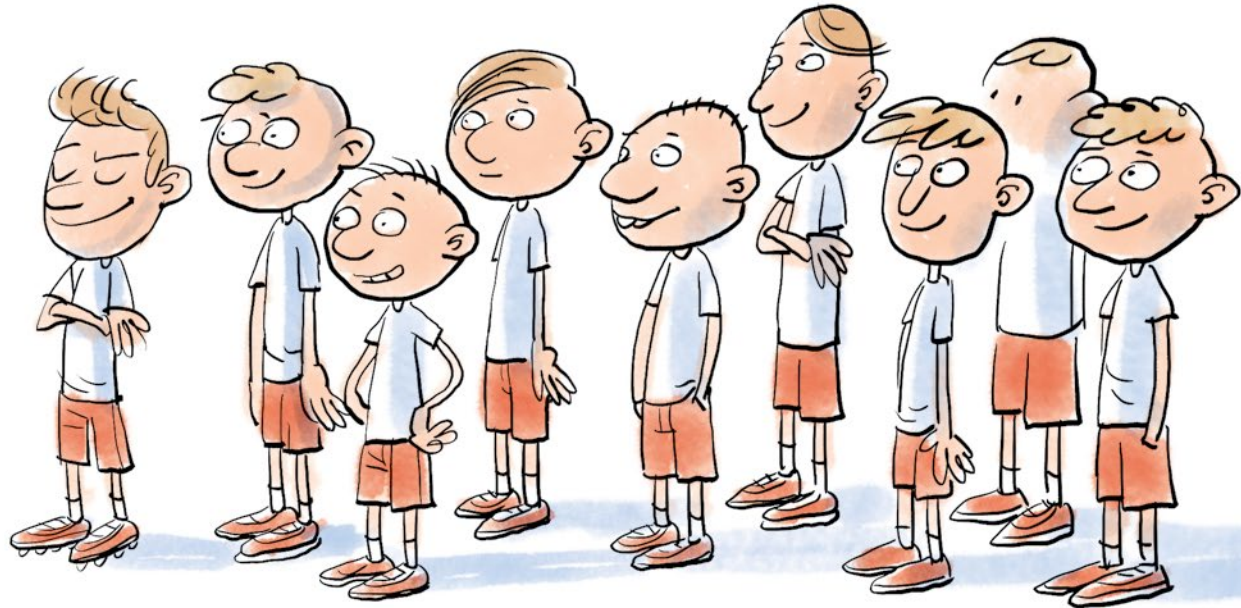
For sure I can play football! I know this, but... what about the rest of our team? Well, it was me who from the beginning of the season told them that we have to keep our weakest players under a special observation and ... if necessary say goodbye to them. The team is as strong as its weakest player. At this moment... it's me.



That night I couldn't sleep well. In the morning I felt awful. I felt like staying at home, but to tell the truth it wouldn't help. I had to face it, I had to act as a true captain. There was no other way- I had to go to school and after the lessons go to our cloakroom and before the training tell other guys that I was leaving. And that's what I did.



‘That’s for our team,’ I ended my short speech in which I reminded them that I had epilepsy and that it didn’t mean that I was a cripple. I still remembered Victor’s dig and decided to work through this nonsense. What is more, at the moment the risk that I might have an attack was close to zero, but... well I couldn’t pretend that I was absolutely healthy.’



Victor looked as a lottery winner. The guys were starring at their shoes. John was the first to say something.

‘Victor reminded us about your illness earlier.’ – I didn’t even think that it was different. As soon as I entered the cloakroom I could see it in their eyes. ‘We had some time to talk about it during the breaks between the lessons.’

I nodded my head. That was clear.

‘I’m glad we agree.’ I wasn’t glad at all, but what else could I say?

‘I don’t think we do,’ John looked into my eyes. Ok, so there will be some comments.

‘We decided that you’re not right.’

I probably didn’t control my face, because John immediately realized that I had no idea what he was talking about.

‘The team is like a chain captain, but not like the one which strength is defined by the weakest link. A team is as strong as strong is friendship which holds it. And we would be hopeless friends if we let you go.’

‘What?!’ Victor jumped off his bench. – ‘What a bullshit? There’s no place for the weak here. Only the best can play!’

‘Jacob isn’t weak’ – red stains appeared on John’s face which showed me how furious he was.’ You can run the fastest in the school but if you don’t understand what the team means and what friendship is then go and run alone on a track.’

‘You’re gonna regret it!’ hissed out Victor and ran out of the cloakroom very fast. He can do it, I must admit.

I wanted to say something but my throat was dry and some invisible hand squeezed my larynx and my eyes got alarmingly wet. John didn’t let me cry. He punched me hard into my arm.

‘Well captain! Change your clothes, we’re starting our training.’

I put myself back together again, got dressed and then... it was the best training in my life. I’d never had such a pleasure playing before. And you know what? That moment when guys didn’t leave me, let me be one of them, just like that, that was the happiest moment. Much more happy than getting the longed-for cup. And I know what I’m saying cause in the final we won 2:1.

