

THE MOST UNLIKELY PLAYER

Hal Ames



It was early fall when I first met Chris. He was a nice boy, but very big and tall for his age. His best friend Aaron brought him to the first soccer practice of the season. He asked if Chris could join the team.

As usual, I said, "Yes."

Aaron had already played two years for me. He was not as big as Chris was, but he was just as strong. He told me that Chris wanted to play soccer, but every team he went to try out for had said no. Later I found out why he was not accepted. The reason: he could not kick a soccer ball.

Chris had huge feet. We sometimes teased him that his feet were as big as a clown's. He would just laugh when we teased him.

He had little coordination with his feet. He would sometimes trip over the ball and fall down. Everyone would laugh at him. He would just laugh with them.

I tried and tried to teach him how to kick the ball. He would run up to ball as fast as he could and then when he kicked the ball, it would roll a few meters and stop. He tried and he tried, but his feet were like duck's feet. They were like of rubber.

Aaron and Chris were best friends. They came to practice together and went home together, but during practice they were always wrestling and fighting. Finally, I had to put them at different ends of the field so they would not fight with each other. After that, I had peace and quiet.

The day of the new season arrived. When it came time for Chris to go into the

game I told him to play defense.

I told him, “If someone is coming at you with the ball, I want you to run straight at the player and look him in the eye. Don’t stop, just run right at him!” Since he was so big I figured he would scare the player.

Chris was fearless. He would run straight at any player who had the ball, and because Chris was so big they would either pass the ball, or turn and go the other way. My plan was working.

Chris was having fun. He was running hard and playing the best that he could, but any time he had the ball, nothing happened. It just went a few meters and then stopped. The players on the other team would laugh at him. He would just laugh with them.

One day, Chris asked me if he could play goalie. At first, I thought it was a bad idea, but when I thought about it I figured, “How could it hurt.”

I decided to let him play the second half.

He changed into the goalie shirt, which was way too small for him, and he began to warm up during the half time break.

The other team scored five goals on him, and of course we lost the game. The other players teased Chris about how many goals they had scored. He just laughed with them.

At the next practice, Chris asked if he could play goalie again. After the disaster, the game before I thought I should say no, but he kept bugging me, so I finally agreed to teach him how to play goalie.

I began to work with Chris. I threw the ball at him and he caught the ball. I threw it harder, and he still caught the ball. I threw the ball high. I threw the ball low. I threw the ball to his left, and I threw the ball to his right. He was catching everything. He started to laugh.

“Hey coach, this is just like basketball!” Chris yelled to me.

I told him to imagine that he was in a basketball game.

The harder I threw the ball the better he got. I decided it was time to kick the ball. I took shot after shot, and he attempted to make every play. He did not get to all the balls I kicked, but he did very well. His hands were so big that he could hold the ball in one hand.

He began to dive for the balls that were to his left and right. He was all dirty, and he had scratches on his legs, but when we were finished, he had a big smile on his face and he thanked me for helping him. He started to laugh.

The next game he asked if he could play goalie again. The other kids laughed.

They said, “No way coach. You saw how bad he was at the last game!”

Chris just laughed, and then he asked me again. “Coach, can I play goalie today?”

For some reason, I said yes.

I decided to wait until the second half to put him in the goal. I was not sure if I was making a good decision or not,

At half time, we were tied one to one. I told Chris to warm up while I talked to the other players. I told them to keep the ball out of the goal area. We needed to protect Chris so they would not score.

When I turned around, Chris was ready. He had gone to the soccer store with his mother. He had gotten a bright red goalie shirt, brand new gloves, and long pants to protect his legs.

I said, “Wow, you look like a real goalie!”

For most of the half, my kids did as they were told. They kept the ball out of our end of the field, but as time was running out one of the players from the other team broke past our defense and went one on one with Chris. As the player dribbled Chris held his ground. He then ran forward toward the player just as I had told him to do when he was playing defense.

I thought, “Oh NO! He is making a big mistake”.

I wanted to turn my head not to watch, but I was not able to do it. The player was fast, and he was good. He dribbled left, and he dribbled right, but Chris just kept running at him. Just as the player was going to shoot Chris jumped on the ball and took it away. The player tripped over Chris and rolled onto the ground. Chris jumped up with a big smile on his face. He had the ball. The other player was lying on the ground on his back. Now Chris had to decide what to do with the ball.

I yelled at him, “Throw the ball!”

I do not know why I said that, maybe because I knew if he tried to kick the ball it would not go very far. He reached back and threw the ball. I was amazed. It sailed more than half the field in the air. He threw it right at one of our players who took the ball, beat the defense and scored to win the game. Chris got the assist!

At the next practice, I worked with Chris on how to throw the ball properly so he would not hurt his arm. I found out that he had been a pitcher on a baseball team, and he was very good.

The next game I started Chris in the goal. He played like a lion. Any player who came into his box with the ball had to beware of Chris being very aggressive, and they risked injury!

We won all our remaining games. Chris turned into a terrific goalie. During the off-season, his parents hired a special goalie coach to work with him. The next season he played with our team again, and we went undefeated. He played in every game.

The next year he tried out for the best team in our city; it was one of the teams that had told him “No” before. He was accepted onto the team, and he played for them for two years traveling all over the United States in tournaments and league games.

In his first year in high school, he was the starting goalie for his school and

played all four years. After high school, he played for a major University. He played there all four years and was third team All-American.

Whenever Chris came home for the holidays, he would call me and ask me if I had a place for him to play. Of course, I always said yes.

Sometimes in life, we have opportunities to become great at something when others are telling us we should quit. Chris was never a quitter.

VOCABULARY (*Match the word to its definition*)

- | | |
|------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. huge _____ | a. fighting |
| 2. wrestle _____ | b. prepares for a game |
| 3. catch _____ | c. sound |
| 4. amazed _____ | d. to hold with the hands |
| 5. quit _____ | e. joke, pester, bother |
| 6. beware _____ | f. stop before the end |
| 7. mistake _____ | g. goof, blunder |
| 8. tease _____ | h. be careful, be cautious |
| 9. warm up _____ | i. surprised |
| 10. noise _____ | j. very big |

TRUE / FALSE

- | | |
|--|-------|
| 1. Chris was small for his age. | T / F |
| 2. Aaron was Chris' best friend. | T / F |
| 3. We lost all our games. | T / F |
| 4. Chris bought a bright blue goalie shirt. | T / F |
| 5. I had assistant coaches who helped me. | T / F |
| 6. Chris was told no by all the teams in our city. | T / F |
| 7. Chris liked basketball better than soccer. | T / F |
| 8. Chris was third team All-American in college. | T / F |
| 9. I met Chris in the fall. | T / F |
| 10. Chris and Aaron liked to fight. | T / F |

MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. Who was Chris' best friend? _____
 - a) Jim
 - b) Bob
 - c) Steve
 - d) Aaron

2. What position did Chris want to play? _____
 - a) defense
 - b) coach
 - c) goalie
 - d) basketball

3. How many goals did Chris give up the first time he was goalie? _____
 - a) 2
 - b) 3
 - c) 7
 - d) 5

4. What did Chris and Aaron do during practice? _____
 - a) wrestled
 - b) ate candy
 - c) played with their other friends
 - d) watched TV

COMPREHENSION: *(Write a complete sentence to answer the question.)*

1. Why couldn't Chris kick a ball very well?

2. What did Chris' parents do for him after the season was over?

3. How long did he play for the good soccer team?

4. How many goals did the team score on Chris his first time in the goal?

5. What other sports did Chris like to play?

6. How many years did Chris play varsity soccer while in high school?

7. What did Chris ask me to do during the holidays from college?

8. When Chris was teased, what would he do?

9. What position did Chris ask the coach to play?

10. What did the other players say when Chris asked to play goalie?
