Five Stars

**Jill patton[[1]](#footnote-1)**

 Mama glanced at me in the rearview mirror as she put the car in park. “Listen, I want you to try real hard and learn a lot about soccer,” she instructed.

 “Yeah, Mama,” I replied, breaking her gaze in the mirror and peering out across the high school soccer fields. Kids swarmed around an enormous tent that was pitched on the edge of the field.

 “But don’t overdo it,” she continued. “If you get wheezy, you tell the counselor that you have asthma and go sit on the side, even if they say no.”

 “Okay, Mama.” I wondered if all those kids would be jealous of my soccer ball, which was glittery blue instead of the boring old black and white pattern.

 “But don’t waste time on the sidelines either,” Mama added. “I paid for you to learn soccer, not sit around.”

 “Can I go?” I asked impatiently. I’d heard the whole “soccer camp is expensive” stuff before. I think Mama was exasperated when I declared that my peewee basketball career was over, and that I wanted to play soccer instead. In basketball, all we needed was twelve bucks for the team t-shirt. But soccer required a ball and shin guards and cleats for my ever-growing kid feet. Then at sign-ups, the soccer parents gave us a flyer for Five Stars Soccer Camp.

 “I don’t think we need camp,” Mama had said politely, laying the flyer back on the table.

 The soccer parents had shared a glance. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” warned a soccer dad with spiky blond hair and gleaming teeth. “You see, a lot of kids start in first grade, so they already know how to play.” He leaned forward, as if he was sharing a secret. “With your daughter starting in second grade… well, you wouldn’t want her to be left behind.”

 The other soccer parents nodded sagely. A second grader couldn’t just walk into their youth soccer league without proper training.

 “I don’t think she’s really interested in camp…” Mama said.

 “I want to go to camp more than anything in life!” I burst out. As soon as I heard the word “camp,” I was sold. Every cartoon had an episode about the characters going to camp, and they always had tons of fun hiking and making campfires and swimming in the lake. It didn’t matter that Five Stars was just a day camp; I was dying to have my own camp adventures.

 That’s how Mama wrote out a check to the soccer parents and how I ended up at Five Stars.

 Mama walked me to the registration tent, where I was assigned to Counselor Chris’s group. Counselor Chris was a skinny high school kid who was chasing his campers around the field. Mama looked skeptically at him. She probably expected a little more for her money.

 “Stay hydrated. Drink all your water,” she advised before leaving.

 Chris finally rounded us up and took us to Field 14, which was a patch of parched grass a thousand miles away from the main tent. It didn’t take long for me to realize that Five Stars was not exactly like camp on TV. There were no s’mores and no canoes, which was a bit of a disappointment. Instead, we spent the entire morning nudging our soccer balls around orange traffic cones, which was fun for about twenty minutes. I started to wonder when Chris was going to break out some camp crafts so we could take a rest from all this soccer business.

 We finally took a break at noon, and I flopped down in the grass with my lunch bag. I was always shy, so I sat at the fringes of the group, close enough to feel like part of the fun, but distant enough to avoid having to talk to anyone. I thought I was invisible until someone plopped down next to me.

 “You’re the tallest person I’ve ever seen,” he declared, bright eyes shining over freckled cheeks and brown hair sticking straight up with sweat.

 “You’re the shortest person I’ve ever seen,” I replied. It wasn’t entirely true, because babies are technically the shortest people on earth. But still, I had to be a foot taller than him.

 “I’m Parker.”

 “I’m Jill.”

 “You must be twelve years old,” he said in awe.

 A little pride bubbled up inside me. “No, I’m seven,” I admitted.

 “No way! I don’t believe you!”

 “I am!”

 “Want to see something cool?” Parker crawled over to the grimy grates of the storm drain, and I followed hesitantly. He scooped a handful of Goldfish crackers from his lunch bag and tossed them into the dark water. The bright orange crackers floated among the dead leaves and candy wrappers, smiling up at us. “See? They’re swimming.”

 I peered back down the storm drain and burst out laughing. We spent the rest of lunchtime throwing Parker’s Goldfish into the murky water.

 Maybe Five Stars didn’t have s’mores or wilderness adventures. But I found a camp friend, and maybe that was even better.

“In soccer, you can use any part of your body except your hands,” Chris explained dryly. It was only the second day, and he’s already had enough of us. He was probably peeved that he had to spend his summer teaching a bunch of brats to play soccer instead of going to some fancy clinic with the other varsity players. “Today you’re going to learn how to bounce the ball off your head.”

 Parker volunteered to throw the ball at Chris for a demonstration. He hurled it at him, and for a moment, I was sure Chris’s head was going to split open like a watermelon. But he sprang up, tucked in his chin, and pop! The ball bounced off of his head and sailed through the air.

 Parker thought this was the funniest thing. He leaped into the air and pretended to headbutt an invisible ball. “Blam! Just like that!” he cried, then scrambled to the front of the line for the drill. I wasn’t quite as enthusiastic. I thought soccer was supposed to stay on the ground, and I had not exactly signed up to get a ball thrown at me.

As I stood in line, dreading my fate, I suddenly got the most incredible idea. When Chris threw the ball, I would lean a teensy bit to the side. I wouldn’t even move my feet so that Chris would never know that I dodged it. The ball would miss me, and Chris would think he had a bad aim and give up.

 Genius!

 I toed up to the front of the line, still impressed at myself for coming up with such a great plan. Chris tossed the ball, and I inched to the side. It flew right past me.

 Chris frowned. “Let’s try that again.”

 He threw the ball again, and I leaned to the other side. He squinted at me.

 I shrugged. “Bad toss.”

 “I’m going to throw this one more time,” Chris explained sternly. “And no funny business.”

 He might have been onto me. I gulped as he threw the ball one last time. It made a gentle arc through the air, and if I had stood still, it would have bounced right off my head. In a desperate attempt to avoid the collision course, I ducked down and swatted at my ankle. The ball soared right over my head.

 “Sorry. A bug bit me,” I said innocently.

 “It bit you through your socks? And your shin guard?” Chris sighed. “Whatever, just go work on dribbling.”

 I smiled and scrambled across the field.

Counselor Chris had taught us the basics, and now we were going to play an actual game. It was only the third day—I didn’t expect things to move so quickly. Between this and the headbutting thing, Chris sure had some high expectations.

 As soon as I stepped onto the field, my head whirled. I could barely keep track of the ball. First, Parker would have it, then all of a sudden, he’d kick it, and it would get lost in a tangle of skinny legs. By the time I saw it again, it was halfway down the field. I tagged along at the edges of the pack, just trying to keep up.

 Then Chris decided to change up our positions. He tossed a damp-ish orange pinny to me and told me to be the goalie. I had only been in soccer for three days, but I knew that being the goalie was pretty much an insult. It was where the coach put the worst player on the team so they could stand quietly and not be in the way.

 I sulked around the goal box, watching the other kids chase one another at the other end of the field. They were so far away, and being in the goal box was like being stuck on an island. I glanced around for something to do while I waited for the action to come my way. I pulled up some grass and inspected the root ball. I tamped some dirt over the opening of an anthill. I almost didn’t notice that the tide of the game turned until a group of forwards slipped past our defense players, who were too busy chatting with one another.

 “Get ready!” Chris hollered to me. “Catch the ball!”

 Except I couldn’t catch anything, which was why I gave up basketball and joined soccer. I froze and stared wide-eyed as the players charged toward me.

 I don’t even remember who kicked the ball. Probably some future star of the varsity team. All I remember is seeing that ball soaring straight at me while my feet were glued to the grass. It sank right into my stomach, and all the air whooshed out of me. I fell backwards, and lay doubled over in the grass.

 Chris shouted at me to throw the ball back out to my teammates, but all I could think about was the dull, throbbing ache of my stomach and the burn of shame creeping over my face. I half expected to throw up, or for all my guts to spill out. Sticky tears started to run down my cheeks. Some kid ducked into the goal box, grabbed the ball, and started the next point. I heaved myself to my feet and clutched my belly as I made my way toward Chris. I even limped a little for extra effect.

 “Chris,” I moaned. “Didn’t you see? That ball hit me in the stomach.”

 Chris looked down mercilessly at my face, which was smeared with a mixture of tears, snot, and sunscreen.

 “I need to sit out,” I insisted. I didn’t even wait for him to give me permission. I hobbled over to the sidelines. Just to make him feel guilty, I turned around and shouted, “I have asthma, you know!”

“I am never, ever being goalie again,” I declared to Chris the next morning.

 He looked at me over his clipboard, sighed, and scribbled something out. “Fine. I’ll put you on defense,” he offered.

 I was moving up in the world! Playing defense meant that you got to hang out near the goal box, and you didn’t have to run unless the ball was on your half of the field. It was the perfect position.

 As soon as the kids from the other team started running my way, I decided to show Chris that I deserved this defense spot. I charged up to the little girl who was dribbling toward our goal. I ran straight at her until we were standing cleat to cleat. She shrieked and shrank away, leaving the ball wide open so I could punt it out to midfield. I didn’t expect defense to be so easy. The girl didn’t even try to protect the ball from me. Then I realized: I was freakishly tall, and I was scary. Nobody wanted me to charge at them full force because I was pretty much a giant, and therefore invincible.

 After that, I gained a reputation as the most aggressive defense player on Field 14. I had no strategy, no technique, no form. I relied on pure intimidation. Whenever anyone dared to approach the goal, I ran at them head-on, baring my teeth and making growly noises. If they held their ground and didn’t flinch, I just started kicking. Clods of grass and dirt went flying as I kicked like mad, and eventually, my cleat would meet the ball and sent it soaring back down the field.

 Finally, the whistle tweeted, and Chris called us over for a break. “Awesome job, Parker. You had some great energy out there,” he praised. “Midfielders, good teamwork and dribbling skills.” He tapped his pen on his clipboard and cast a glance toward me. “Defense, nice job.”

 I smiled smugly at Chris. Something told me that he was never going to make me goalie again.

 It was the last day of soccer camp.

 I wasn’t sad.

 In fact, I was a little glad that I wouldn’t have to endure any more long afternoons in the sticky summer heat. I would really enjoy the two soccer-free weeks between now and the start of season practices.

 After lunch, we gathered in the big registration tent for the awards ceremony. By the time we trekked there all the way from Field 14, there was barely any room left inside. We sat cross-legged in the grass, squinting to see the action at the front of the tent.

 “Maybe you’ll win an award.” Parked nudged me in the ribs in encouragement. “Although I don’t know how you’d ever get to the front of the tent through this crowd.”

 I sighed and shook my head. I’d been daydreaming about Counselor Chris slipping a shiny medal over my head, but deep down, I knew I wasn’t going to get an award. Probably because of the whole headbutting incident. “I don’t think I’ll win. But you might!” I meant it. Parker was the best player on Field 14, and if any of us deserved a medal, it was him.

 “Kids, you’ve all done a fantastic job this week,” the camp leader gushed. “We’ve been watching you hone your skills, and everyone should be so proud.”

 Yeah, yeah, we knew all that junk about being proud, even if you don’t win. We were too focused on the gleaming medals in his hands. Real medals, just like the Olympics!

 “But there are a few players who really shined this week,” the camp leader continued. Everyone in the tent leaned forward in anticipation, waiting for him to announce the winners. As he called out names, we glared at each winner in envy.

Funny, how all the kids that he called up were seated at the front of the tent.

 It was a total bust; no one from Field 14 won any recognition. We trudged back, but our faces brightened when Counselor Chris held up a plastic bin full of prizes. As soon as he pried off the lid, we all pounced like little savages. We nearly took Chris’s arm off as our tiny hands snatched up glittery pencils and gel pens and temporary tattoos. I was jostled to the back of the crowd, desperately stretching out my hands to get a prize before all the good stuff was gone.

 The chaos finally died down as everyone scurried off the gather their bags and go home. It was just me and Chris. He took the last prize out of the box and held it out to me.

 He shrugged. “It’s the only thing left,” he said sheepishly.

 I knew a thing or two about prize boxes, and the number one rule was that the prize box was supposed to be bottomless. The thrill of picking out a prize was that you got to dig around through a million different options, which might have been better than the prize itself. I stared at his outstretched hand, dumbstruck. He held a pair of round plastic glasses with a fat, pink nose and a thick mustache attached to it. It was like one of those goofy disguises that people wear in cartoons. I never knew they existed in real life.

 It was the ugliest prize I could imagine. No seven-year-old girl wanted to wear a glasses-nose-mustache monstrosity. But Mama taught me to always be thankful for a gift, even if you hate it. I took the glasses and mumbled, “Thanks.”

 I stuffed the glasses in the bottom of my drawstring bag, right next to yesterday’s socks. I gathered up my things to leave when Parker bounded over to me.

 “I wanted to say bye!” he said. Before I could protest, he threw his arms around my waist and tried to pick me up in a hug. I squealed as we toppled over into the grass. We laughed, just like when we threw the Goldfish in the storm drain. For a moment, I forgot about the stupid glasses and the medals.

 “When our teams play against each other, I’m gonna beat you!” he said, jumping up and brushing off his shirt. Before I could reply, he scrambled off.

Mama was waiting at the edge of the field She waved to me, and I ran over.

 “Who was that little boy who tried to pick you up?” she asked as we walked back to the car.

I glanced back over the scraggly grass of Field 14. “Oh, he’s my friend, Parker.”

“So did you learn a lot? Are you good at soccer?”

 I shrugged, not really knowing how to answer.

 After all, those were two totally different questions.

1. Jill Patton, a student at King’s College, won honorable mention in the Delta Epsilon Sigma annual poetry undergraduate national writing competition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)