

JUST ONE OF THE BOYS

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[Assignment: Write a short essay which makes a point about gender. You can write about your own experience in order to support or oppose something we have read. Structure your essay as a narrative.]

When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
when the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
when the funds are low, and the debts are high,
and you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
when care is pressing you down a bit,
rest if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is queer with its twists and turns,
as everyone of us sometimes learns,
and many a failure turned about,
when she might have won had she stuck it out;
don't give up though the pace seems slow--
you may succeed with another blow.

Success is failure turned inside out--
the silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
and you never can tell how close you are.
It may be near when it seems so far,
so stick to the fight when you're hardest hit--
it's when things seem worst that you must not quit.

When I was down and out early in my military career, a dear friend gave me this poem, and never before had I felt so motivated, so proud, so inspired to do my best. From that day on, I've used this poem as a kind of theory on life, and this poem gave me the incentive to do what this story is all about.

In my first year of high school, I did what all the freshmen did--I joined all the clubs, tried to get good grades, bought an elevator pass in a school that didn't have an elevator--I was a normal enthusiastic teenager. But I did one things that set me apart from the rest, one thing that would place me in the unique column for the rest of my life--I played football.

Now, just to make sure you don't think I'm some sort of psycho, I really did want to play football. I was always fascinated with the game and I always wanted to play organized ball, but my mother would always say, "That's not very lady-like" or "Why don't you play basketball like the rest of the GIRLS?" So, for the first eleven years of my life, I played organized basketball, volleyball and softball with the "rest of the GIRLS" and a pick-up game of football with my brother on the weekends. I was happy but not completely contented. I quickly learned to love football and looked forward to every weekend spent with my older brother, with that dirty old Cooper football that wasn't even Canadian regulation size, just throwing the ball back and forth. Occasionally, my brother would get

carried away and tackle me into a big puddle of mud and although my mother winced every time it happened, there was nothing I loved more. When I turned eleven, I began to notice I wanted something more from sports, something I wasn't getting from the other games.

In that same year, the opportunity arose for me to attend military school during the summer. After discussing it at length with my parents, we decided it would be best if I did this and at this young and tender age, I left Toronto to attend Basic Training. When I came back, I was a totally different person. My parents hardly recognized me and my siblings thought they traded me in for a new sister. What they didn't realize is that the military taught me that when I wanted something, I should go and get it. And that's exactly what I did.

I spent another year of two playing the three "female" sports, always watching football and playing with my brother on weekends, trying to pick up new moves or plays. When I graduated from middle school in 1989, I knew my time had come.

I had only been at John F. Kennedy High School for a week when announcements began about the football season. (JFK is a fictional name, as are all the names in this story, to respect those parties involved, especially my alma mater.) All freshman BOYS who were interested in playing on the team were asked to meet on the football field at 3:30 p.m. in athletic attire for tryouts. As I sat quietly in homeroom, listening to the rest of the announcements, I smiled to myself.

At 3:20 p.m. that day, I sat in the change room with about twenty other GIRLS. As I was putting on my running shoes, one GIRL came up and said, "Are you trying out for the basketball team?"

I sort of smiled and replied, "Well, no."

She looked so confused it took everything I had not to laugh at her.

"Well, why are you changing then?" She chewed her gum in the most annoying way.

"I'm going out for the--uh--football team." I'm not quite sure why I mumbled it, but I did.

"Oh." She walked away half-laughing and half-dumbfounded.

As I strolled out of the change room, down the stairs and out to the football field, I was first engulfed with the magnitude of what I was doing. I mean here I was, a 5'3", 116 pound freshman going out for the football team. And to top it all off, I was a GIRL. But I kept on walking and joined a group of freshman BOYS that I had seen in the past week, obviously also trying out for the team.

At first, no one knew how to react to me being there. The frosh BOYS said "hi" and asked me how I was doing, but the juniors and seniors, all wearing their matching previous-season football jerseys, looked at me as if I had lobsters crawling out of my ears. One of them even had the audacity to run up to me and say, "The basketball tryouts are inside," to

which I responded, "I am very aware which tryouts I'm at, thanks." He ran back to the other group of football players and obviously relayed what I had said, after which they all stared at me until one of them ran up to the head coach and told him the same story.

When coach Joe Blow first approached me, I didn't know what to think. "Is there something I can help you with, young lady?" he asked me.

I smiled at first but then got very serious.

"I'm just here to try out for the football team," I casually replied.

The coach's expression said it all. His little eyes squinted, his eyebrows pointed down to his nose and his temples flared.

"But you're a GIRL," he said, as if he had just delivered a news bulletin to me.

I was taken aback by this--not because I didn't expect it, but because nobody had really verbalized it before. I was a GIRL. And he was a BOY. And although he found it quite the conversation topic, I couldn't figure out what in the hell it had to do with football.

"I just want to try out." I stood my ground.

"But you're a GIRL," he repeated. I was beginning to wonder if this man had "broken record" syndrome.

"I just want to try out for the football team. If that's a problem, I can have my lawyers call you." In the corner of my eye I saw at least fifteen football players' jaws drop.

"Naw," the coach replied coolly after a few brief second to collect his thoughts. "I'll let you try out. Get in line with the rest of them."

And with that my football career began.

The first thing the coach had us do was run the track surrounding the football field three times. (Big deal--at military school that was a light jog!) He then had some of the older football players lead us through a series of stretches and jumping jacks which were no problem. The next drill was a sort of stepping stone for me. I had noticed that the head coach had chosen his assistant, Don Juan, to keep a close eye on me. He stood at the back of the formation so he thought I wouldn't notice. After the jumping jacks, Juan screamed at Player A, who was leading us, "How 'bout some push-ups?"

"Sure thing," Player A replied, and proceeded to order us to "hit the ground to give the assistant coach some push-ups."

Player A had originally instructed us to do twenty-five push-ups. After reaching this with relative ease, while my frosh comrades had a bit of difficulty, Player A then instructed me only, "since I liked doing push-ups so much," to do twenty more. After I popped these off with relative

ease also, I stood up to find many a jaw dropped. Even the head coach was a little surprised.

Next were wind sprints. After watching some of the larger BOYS lumber through the sixty meters in about twelve seconds, I hustled through in a little under nine. This also gained me a little respect with the coach, and it seemed as if some of the players, at least for the most part, had forgotten I was a GIRL.

Then we split up into different positions, and although I originally wanted to be a running back, the coaches persuaded me into going for wide receiver because of my speed and size. I was at the back of the line to receive passes from the quarterback, Player B. Each pass he laid out was usually a beautiful spiral arching just at the right time and landing softly into the hands of the BOYS in front of me. When my turn came up, I turned to hear the count from the quarterback and he smiled deviously at me. The center hiked the ball and I took off like a dart down the side line, waiting to turn and see that beautiful spiral coming for me, but when I turned, all I saw was this end-over-end, too short, ugly pass. I slowed down gradually, changed direction and jogged back to the end of the line.

"Sorry," Player B shouted. "Maybe the ball doesn't like GIRLS."

This got a few chuckles from the guys in line and a huge boisterous laugh from the center. I just smiled and said to myself, "Wait for the next one--don't quit--wait for the next one."

We went through this drill for about fifteen minutes and every time my turn would come up, Player B would throw a terrible end-over-end pass way short of me. I tried to compensate by slowing down my running, but then he started to throw it over my head. I just smiled and kept on running back to the end of the line.

See, it didn't matter that he wouldn't throw me a pass. The point was that I was running the right patterns, doing what I was supposed to be doing to the best of my ability. I didn't have to prove myself to him or to the center or to the coaches or to anyone else. By stepping onto that field that day, I proved something to myself, and that's all that really mattered.

Practice ended that day at about 5:30. I hadn't been paying attention to what was going on off the field but quite an audience had stayed to see me try out. Joe Blow announced that a cut sheet would be up tomorrow at lunch and "If you aren't on it, thanks for coming out." As I left the field, a few of my friends ran up and gave me a big group hug.

"You did the right thing, Sue," said one of them.

"Yeah, we're proud of ya," said another.

The next day I asked my friends to check the list with me. When we saw my name, we almost died of fright. It really was an accomplishment. I went into it thinking I didn't have a chance in hell of making the team and I did. In the end, it didn't matter that I wasn't a guy, but rather, it counted to the coach that I wanted to play and I could play. I

went against whatever it was my parents tried to teach me and I succeeded in something I wanted to do.

As I look back now on it, I don't know what I would have done had I not made the team. It's not that football played such an important role in my life (I played one season and sat on the bench for most of it), but what mattered is that I broke away from the stereotypical role that has been set for football and other sports. It shouldn't matter what sex I am--as it shouldn't matter what color or creed I am. What mattered in the end is that I saw something I wanted and I went and got it--male or female, I stuck to the fight when I was hardest hit and when things seemed worst, I did not quit.