

Shoot Away

By Max Sueltenfuss

“Are you excited about your first soccer practice, Max? I can’t believe you’re doing it in kindergarten!” my mom asked. Inside I had the jitters, but instead of saying that I nodded.

“Yeah,” I replied. *A simple yet sweet response*, I thought.

As we pulled into the practice field, my eyes opened wide at the beautiful sight around me. The old oaks towered above me, the gaps in their leaves revealing a deep blue sky with little birds fluttering through the air. This was my first soccer practice ever, and I was anxious to get started. As we pulled into the parking spot, I hopped out of the car door eagerly and walked into the park to get to my field. When I saw the coaches, I sprinted to them, and panted out, “Hi. My name is Max and I’m on your soccer team.” Soon, we ran through the drills, and even though my mind was laser focused, my feet couldn’t seem to get the memo. I kept stumbling this way and that, just to keep control of the ball.

The rest of the practice went about the same way. Them telling us what to do, then me tripping over my own feet and getting embarrassed. When I finally went home, I was still annoyed at my performance, but something had sparked inside of me: a desire to get better and better.

Practice after practice, game after game, my skill was creeping up to the point of being able to dribble the ball, and then dribble while running, all of the way to the point of being able to run with the ball and then pass. Then, all of a sudden, the season was over and I fell into a soccer slump. Over the course of the summer, I kept working, but wasn’t making progress without the designated practice.

In the fall, I was tentative to approach my coach to tell him that I hadn’t gotten better. When I did though, he didn’t react like I had thought. He didn’t get mad at all, or even annoyed, he just laughed and said that it was completely normal and that I shouldn’t be ashamed. I walked off feeling bright inside, glad that I wasn’t in trouble.

A few practices later, we worked on shooting. When it was my turn, I lined up, closed my eyes, and swung. The ball rolled slowly to the left of the net, refusing to cooperate. I hung my head, my ears burning red.

“It’s okay Max, you’re new. We’ll all have some trouble,” my coach consoled me. “Nobody will be perfect on the first try.” As the next person walked up, I saw a look of determination on his face that I must have had. I flashed him a thumbs up, contrasting the relief I felt that someone else was going to miss as hard as I had. The kid wound up, swung, but instead of missing, he nailed the ball into the corner of the goal.

“Amazing job, Bennett!” The coach cheered as he walked up to Bennett, who I now recognized as a quiet kid from last season who never talked much. My feeling of shame had now redoubled and I fought to keep the emotion hidden from my face.

The practices in that season all ended the same way, me walking back to my mom, who kept insisting that I looked amazing, with my stomach churning with emotions and self doubt. She always asked me if I was okay, like she could see into the swirling waters of my feelings. My reply was always the same.

“I’m fine,” I would say, dismissing the notion that anything was off. She would just shrug her shoulders and lead me back to the car, but she would keep glancing over at me skeptically.

“Alright, we got this, guys!” I said. In my head, though, my brain was spinning. We had to win this game, for it was the last of the season.

Then a ref came over and said, “We’ll need someone for the coin flip. Who’ll it be?” All of the kids shot their hands in the air, begging for it to be them.

“You know what, I think Max should have a go at it,” my coach suggested. My heart soared, and I wanted to give him a hug, but instead I kept a cool face and walked off, but not before saying thank you. I won the coin flip, and I felt a sense of pride, but I told myself to wait for the game.

I passed it to Bennett, who passed it back to me. I surprised everyone, including myself, when I cut around the defender. Once in the goalie box, I looked where I was shooting, aimed, and fired. The air was still for a second, then claps and cheers surrounded me. I walked off in a daze, not quite realizing what had just happened.

6 Years Later

As my feet pound against the soft grass, I hear the familiar sound of wind rushing past my ears, combined with the ball hitting my foot. As I see the goal approaching, I calculate the goalie’s position. *He’s favoring his left foot on the right side of the goal.* With hardly a thought on how to do it, I lift my toe, bring back my leg, and rip the soccer ball into the top left corner of the goal. I had just beat the number one team. I ignore the cheers and walk to the sideline. Scoring has become a normal pleasure.