

Excerpts from *The Book of Great Canadian Short Sports Stories*

From *A December Tournament*

Weyburn, Saskatchewan December, 1970

It was the first time Matthew Gripman had played in a tournament away from home. The first time he'd ever travelled anywhere without his parents, really. Except for once, when he'd taken the bus to Winnipeg. But that time his uncle met him, and he'd stayed at his cousins'. This time, in Weyburn, they were mostly on their own. And they were staying with complete strangers.

Like everyone else on the team, Matthew didn't know very much about Weyburn. He'd seen the Weyburn Red Wings play a few times, in Flin Flon against the Bombers. And he'd heard there was a big mental hospital in Weyburn, which sounded kind of scary. That was it. That was the sum total of what he knew about the place before they got there.

It was an eight-team bantam tournament, for under-fifteen-year-olds. There were Manitoba all-star-teams from Flin Flon and Dauphin, and six teams from Saskatchewan: Prince Albert, Yorkton, Melville, Regina, Estevan and the host Weyburn. Of the sixteen players on the Flin Flon team, Matthew was one of three thirteen-year-olds; the rest were fourteen. He'd been picked because he was leading his thirteen-year-old league in goals. He loved scoring goals, especially deking a goalie on a breakaway. And he didn't feel *that* out of place with kids that were older than him. They were a bit bigger and a bit rougher. If they were chasing you, they'd poke your legs with the blades of their sticks. And they'd always try and nail you against the boards. But if you were smart about it, it wasn't much different.

The only negative thing was Billy Wells. He lived in the same neighbourhood as Matthew. They played on the same rink near the school. Billy was the best fourteen-year-old in Flin Flon, and he was also a really big kid. He was fine as long as he was getting all the praise and attention. But he was a puck hog and he could be pretty mean sometimes. He would taunt other kids and make fun of them, even push them around. And he was jealous. If somebody else got the winning goal or got a hat trick, he didn't like it. And he *really* didn't like Matthew. Matthew could tell by the

look Billy gave him when they'd all met to plan the trip; the way he ignored him. A thirteen-year-old, who scored a lot of goals, on the same team as him? Matthew knew he was going have to face up to Billy at some point.

Four cars made the nine-hour Thursday drive to Weyburn, four players in each car. Thankfully, Matthew wasn't in the same car as Billy Wells. The drivers were all players' dads, including the team coach, Mr. Reznick. Matthew got to ride with Mr. Friesen and the other two thirteen-year-olds, along with another boy, Roger Ealey, who he was billeted with.

From *Playing Time*

Winnipeg

A shootout... No game should be decided that way. Especially not a championship game. But rules are rules. No one scored in two overtime periods and there we were.

It was late in the afternoon, a warm and sunny Saturday, the end of September. We were on the grassy north field adjacent to Glenlawn Collegiate, for the fourteen-year-old girls' city soccer final. Our River Heights team, the South Division champion, was facing Gateway, the North Division winner.

Terry and I had co-coached girls' soccer teams for six years. This was the first time we'd reached the finals, so we were totally pumped. In real life, Terry was my sister-in-law, my younger brother's partner. As a coach, she was the bad cop to my good cop, especially at practices, insisting on long running drills and endless repetitions of throws and corner kicks.

We practised penalty kicks all the time and we were well-prepared. There was no question who our five kickers would be; it was just a matter of the order. We decided on the three forwards going first. I quickly scribbled down the names and jersey numbers and walked over to the referee at midfield, handing him the list. Gateway won the coin toss and elected to kick first.

It had been an incredibly exciting game. Somehow we'd found ourselves down 2-0 with only fifteen minutes to play. That was despite the fact that we had outplayed Gateway, in every aspect of the game. We just couldn't score. Either we'd kick it wide or their goalkeeper would pull off an amazing save. And somehow they got two on us. The first was a low kick, not even that hard, right along the ground, past a crowd of players, that just kept rolling until it found the far corner of our net. Our goalkeeper just didn't see it. Their second goal was on an indirect kick, after one of our defenders had made contact with a Gateway forward. It was a good, hard kick, that shot over our wall of players.

But then we rallied. We had all noticed that their goalkeeper played high most of the time; she backed in when the play carried into her end. At half-time, Terry and I spoke with both of our outside forwards about it. They both had strong enough kicks to fly it right over their goalkeeper, from fairly far out. And that's how we scored our first goal and got back in the game. Christine, on the right side, had a lot of room for a moment, as she carried the ball over midfield. At that point, the goalkeeper was still out at the edge of her box. Christine looked up, took two more steps and then launched an amazing kick, very high and very hard. It sailed over and past the goalkeeper and we were only one goal down.

Five minutes later, Leona, our centre forward, tied the game, scoring the same way she'd been scoring all season, straight through the defence. She was our leading scorer, a relentless bulldog of a player, short and wiry and very aggressive, always looking to push the ball by players. It meant she was constantly in the face of other teams' biggest girls, and she was pushed, elbowed, held and tripped in every game, often hitting the ground hard. Nothing fazed her. One game, she split her lip open on her braces. She got up, with her mouth bleeding, and calmly knifed the penalty kick into the corner of the goal. Immediately after, she walked directly over to the girl who had tripped her, and performed a mock curtsy. It was one of my favourite moments of the season.

From *We Could Have Come Back*

Bluto unleashed a booming cry of 'Play ball!', and the game got underway. The first batter was the Creighton shortstop, proudly wearing the Braves' trademark grey and maroon uniform. His name was Billy Hammond. Like all the other players, his uniform was sparkling clean, freshly laundered after the previous week's game. The skinny little guy gamely stepped into the batter's box to face Scottie Averson. He had an old blue batting helmet on his head, the team's one and only helmet, which was way too big for him. So was the battered wooden bat he had in his hands, which looked huge.

'Come on, Scottie!' cheered Larry, his proud father. 'Let's go get 'em!'

Scottie wasted no time going after the batter, who looked like he was drowning in the big, blue helmet. Strike one, looking. Strike two, swinging. And then strike three, the Creighton boy swinging at a pitch that was way outside. The pitch was so far outside that the Lakeside catcher, Toby Brown, couldn't even get his glove on it. With everyone on the Creighton bench yelling for him to run, Billy dropped the bat and raced to first base on the wild pitch. He was a fast runner, but Toby had a good arm, and once he'd retrieved the ball from the backstop, Toby made a strong throw to first base. It would have been a close play, except the throw was three feet over the first baseman's head and sailed into right field. As the right fielder chased down the ball, the Creighton runner rounded first and headed for second. His teammates and parents cheered and his coach, stationed near third base, excitedly yelled at him to keep on going. 'Take third Billy. You got third, Billy. Turn it on.' So Billy touched second base and headed full-steam for third. He was halfway to third when the second baseman relayed the throw from the right fielder, firing the ball in the dirt to the waiting third baseman. The ball skipped past the third baseman, all the way to the chain-link fence along the third-base line, as the Creighton shortstop crossed home plate with the game's first run. His teammates were excited and cheering and so were their families in the stands.

Larry had brought a scoresheet to record the game. The play was scored K, WP, E2, E4. Scottie now had 21 strikeouts on the season.

'Shake it off, Scottie!' yelled his father, encouragingly. 'Let's get the next guy.' To my dad and me, sitting beside Larry, he added, under his breath, 'Jeez. He struck the kid out. And he scores a run on the play?'

From *The Soviet Goalie Stick*

Our timing was perfect. The players hadn't hit the ice yet. We were able to stand with five or six feet of the rubber-matted walkway. After a few minutes, the Soviet dressing room door opened. The coaches and other team officials came out and then the door slammed shut again. The head coach, poker-faced Viktor Tikhonov, walked right in front of us, away from the ice, to an area under the stands twenty feet away, where he lit up a cigarette. I immediately gave Grisha a nudge with my elbow, gesturing for him to walk over and approach Tikhonov.

Grisha sheepishly walked up to the stern-looking Soviet coach. I could see them exchanging a few words. He returned almost immediately. Apparently Tikhonov had said he couldn't help Grisha, that we could ask the players directly. The rest of the Soviet staff were standing together just outside the dressing room door. Grisha blurted out a few sentences to the group, in Russian. I heard him say "student" somewhere in his plea. But none of the team officials so much as acknowledged him.

With no success from the Soviet staff, Grisha was all set to hail the players individually when they came out of the dressing room. All of a sudden, a pair of arena security staff appeared and moved us back, several feet away from the walkway. Grisha still tried, calling out in Russian to the players as they filed out. Either they didn't hear him or they simply ignored him. As disappointing as it was, what a thrill it was to see those faces up close, as they walked out onto the ice: Tretiak, Kharlamov, Yakushev, Mikhailov ...

We were at a perfect vantage point to watch the Soviet practice, mostly passing and skating drills. They were so quick. Then they ran through some two on ones. I couldn't keep my eyes off Kharlamov. He was such an incredibly fast skater. And the way he would cut in and shoot on the fly...

Tretiak didn't seem to be too worried about stopping the pucks that came his way.

It was a very short practice, less than half an hour. When it ended, the players didn't come off the ice together, rather one or two at a time. This gave Grisha a better chance to catch the attention of one of them. We nosed our way as close as we could to the dressing room area and Grisha faithfully started his pitch. He had to speak fairly loudly, as we were five or six feet from the walkway. As each player came off the ice and walked toward the dressing room, Grisha addressed him in Russian, saying (as he told me) something like "Can you please help my friend with a souvenir. He is a student and he is a real hockey fan. He would be very grateful."

One by one, the players quickly filed by, and almost without exception, they completely ignored Grisha. There was no doubt they heard him. A few of them briefly looked up at Grisha, but not a single one responded. One by one my heroes disappeared into the dressing room and it looked like all was lost, until the very last player came off the ice. That player was Aleksander Sidelnikov, the back-up goalie. He had taken a few extra shots from one of the other players.

Sidelnikov was probably the least heralded player on the Soviet team. After all, Vladislav Tretiak was the number-one goalie. Tretiak played in all of the important international games, and he was an amazing goaltender, maybe the best in the world. But Sidelnikov had to be a pretty good goalie in his own right. I mean, he was the second best goalie in the Soviet Union! But playing behind Tretiak, hardly anyone had even heard of Sidelnikov. I'd barely heard his name until that night in Winnipeg and I'd certainly never seen him play before.

When Sidelnikov came off the ice, he was alone, a few minutes after the rest of the team. Grisha again made his pitch. To our great surprise, Sidelnikov stopped and talked to Grish, calmly and politely. They talked at some length, with Grisha pointing me out to Sidelnikov and requesting a souvenir. Of course, I couldn't understand a word they were saying.