

SAM THE ATHLETE

A tender story, told with a light touch, from which the reader could easily infer that the author believes the seeds of victory are planted with every defeat and that the path of the heart is the only path worth following. A tale suitable for both girls and boys.

THE WEEK BEFORE school began, Sam, heading for a new school—middle school—and about to begin a whole new chapter in his life, appeared in his parents' bedroom in the middle of the night. He tapped his mother on the shoulder.

"I can't sleep," he said.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" asked Morley, who couldn't sleep herself and knew perfectly well what was the matter.

"I need new sneakers," said Sam, "for school."

Trying to decipher the fuddle between what a boy wants

and what a boy needs is a game best played with hunches, with a roll of the dice and a shot in the dark. You can try to do it scientifically; you can consult the experts; you can study the social trends and scribble notes in little files—in other words, you can do it by the book, but you'll never do as well as the mother who travels through the kingdom of boys with a purse full of rabbits' feet and chicken bones—a mother who knows the meaning of shooting stars and sneakers.

A mother who knows the difference between shoes that fit, which Sam's still did, and shoes that fit *in*.

Morley took Sam to the shoe store the next afternoon. She was overwhelmed by the huge display of running shoes, which covered an entire wall of the store. Sam didn't hesitate. Not for a moment. Sam knew exactly what he wanted. "That one," he said, pointing at a red runner with white wings stitched along the side. Morley picked the shoe off the display, turned it over and furrowed her brow.

"Is it too expensive?" asked Sam fearfully.

How much is too much to make your child feel good?

Morley shrugged. "Let's see," she said.

The man from the shoe store measured Sam's feet, disappeared into the back of the store and then emerged carrying a royal blue cardboard box. The red runners were wrapped in gold tissue.

Sam sighed.

"Sit down," said the man.

Sam sat down. He watched the man pull out the first runner, unwrap it and drop the gold tissue back in the box. He watched him put the laces in the shoes.

The man smiled. He pulled the shoe open and knelt down. Sam stuck out his sock foot.

He had never felt anything like this sneaker ever before. The shoe was both tight and loose at the same time. Firm but spongy. As strong as steel, yet as soft as a sigh.

"It ... fits ... perfectly," said Sam.

"These are built for speed," said the man, who was still kneeling in front of him.

"I know," said Sam. "I can feel it."

"A lot of people find them *too* fast," said the man. "They come with a warning."

"Uh-huh," said Sam, nodding earnestly.

"Do you want to take them for a test drive?" asked the man.

Sam stood up.

"Usually," said the man, "I make people sign a waiver. But in your case ..." Sam wasn't listening. Sam was rocking from side to side.

"In your case," said the man, "I think we can overlook formalities."

Sam was eyeing the shoes in the mirror. The man waved in the general direction of the door. Sam wasn't paying attention. Sam was thinking how cool he looked. He was thinking that with these shoes on his feet, he would never

walk again. He would dash and dart; he would bound and leap; he would sprint and spring.

The salesman looked at Morley. He said, "They're all wearing these ones."

Sam stepped over the empty shoebox. He walked across the store. He could feel a sense of velocity building inside him. He looked at his mother earnestly.

"These are the ones," he whispered.

He wore the shoes to the cash register. The man held up Sam's old white runners. They looked deflated, worn and tired, as if all the life had been sucked out of them.

The man asked what he wanted to do with his old shoes. Sam looked at his mother. And Morley said exactly what Sam wanted her to say. She said, "Keep the old shoes. We don't need them anymore."

When they were outside the store on the sidewalk, Morley said, "Why don't you see just how fast they are?" In his imagination, Sam didn't hear his mother's invitation. In his imagination, Sam heard the abrupt bark of a gun going off in the distance, and he was off. He cut along the sidewalk like a terrier, zigging in front of a man talking on a cellphone, zagging past a lady carrying a fancy leather briefcase. He was so preoccupied with the wind on his face, with the angle he was holding his hands so they would cut through the air with maximum efficiency, so captivated with the beauty of his new shoes, with how good his new red leather shoes with the white wings looked against the grey sidewalk, that he ran right into a telephone pole.

There was just too much to think about.

And as Sam sat on the sidewalk, his head in his hands, he was thinking that he should have known all along that the shoes weren't going to help. Middle school was going to be just as horrible as elementary school.

It wasn't that he was worried about the teachers, or the other kids, although it was partly about the teachers and partly about the other kids. Mostly it was about academics. And mostly it was about the most important academic class of them all—gym class.

Right from the beginning, gym class hadn't worked for Sam. The September he was in grade one, his teacher, Mrs. Hayes, kept talking about clothes for gym. "Don't forget your clothes for gym," she reminded everyone as they were leaving school on the first Friday. Sam looked around the class, wondering which kid was Jim and why he couldn't bring his own clothes.

Gym class was where Sam was introduced to the world of sports, and soon, all Sam wanted in the world—and he wanted it as badly as he had ever wanted anything—was to be an athlete. He kept trying so hard, and he kept failing—miserably.

He had had such hope for the red running shoes. But the running shoes weren't going to change anything. He was always going to be running into telephone poles.

His downfall had begun with his very first game of soccer. Sam loved soccer, or loved the idea of it—the idea

And each time he was galloping in, he should have been pedalling back, because the ball had, inevitably, been hit far, not short. Sam would be coming when he should have been going, aware of his mistake too late to do anything other than make a clumsy leap in the air as the ball sailed over his head for extra bases.

When he went bowling, Sam didn't only throw gutter balls. Sam's balls actually *cleared* the gutters and bounced into the neighbouring lanes. The only time he got a strike it happened two lanes over, and they wouldn't count it in his score.

When Murphy's dad took them curling, Sam took a mighty run and heaved his rock as hard as he could. It was going so fast that he was afraid to let go. So there was Sam, clutching the rock like a caboose, with Murphy's dad in the background, screaming frantically, "Release! Release!"

Sam sucked at sports.

He liked hockey best. But despite his years in ice hockey, and despite his mother's expert guidance, Sam never managed to master stopping on skates. He developed a method of turning in circles until he slowed down, which worked well enough, except it left him dizzy and out of the play. So, in grade five, Sam began to play goalie, thinking that with the net behind him, he wouldn't *have* to stop. He wasn't a horrible goalie. From time to time he actually made stops of sufficient improbability that his teammates skated by him and smacked his goalie pads

of having teammates. The idea of the big white-and-black soccer ball, the shin guards and the high black socks, the bright red pinnie. But Sam had a huge soccer deficit. Sam didn't have the foggiest clue what was going on.

And because everyone else seemed to understand the game, Sam didn't dare ask. Instead, he developed his own soccer strategy. Sam's strategy was to stay in constant motion. He followed the pack of kids up and down the field, trying to *look* engaged but avoiding the ball at all costs. Every game he ran and ran until he was so exhausted that he lost sense of everything around him. He lost sense of the field, of the kids, of the coach on the sidelines. Worst of all, he lost his sense of direction and which goal was whose. He inevitably fell behind the pack, so everyone would be running one way and Sam would be going the other. Inevitably, he would end up running full tilt into someone who was running in the right direction. Twice he was penalized for unnecessary roughness.

"He seems to be an angry boy," said Mrs. Hayes to Morley on parent-teacher night.

Baseball was even worse. Sam was banished to the outfield, doomed to watch the action miles from home plate, holding on to his mitt like a refugee clutching a battered suitcase. He would squint into the sun, praying that no one would hit the ball near him, because each time they did, Sam would automatically, involuntarily start loping towards home plate, screaming, "I got it. I got it!"

with their sticks. That felt good. Hockey wasn't completely horrible.

And that is why, in the second week of September—his second week in his new middle school—when Sam spotted a poster outside the lunchroom, he stopped in his tracks. "Tryouts: Tuesday 4 P.M. Field Hockey. Please wear athletic shoes and protective headgear."

"Field hockey!" said Sam. Hockey without skates. This, he thought, with the reckless faith of the hopeless, was the sport he had been looking for all his life. Right there, he decided he would try out.

On Tuesday of that week, Sam put on his hockey gear and joined the circle of helmeted kids waiting on the soccer field. In case it didn't work out, he hadn't told anyone what he was doing.

The coach was a short-haired, no-nonsense woman in a blue track suit.

"Let's get going," she barked. "Fullbacks, by the pitch with Aaron; halfbacks, by the bench with Chris; wings and centres, at the circle with Lee. And it looks like we finally have a goalie." Coach was smiling right at Sam. Sam was standing on the edge of the circle like a medieval knight, wrapped in his wire basket mask, hockey helmet, foam neck protector, chest protector, padded apron, leg pads and hockey gloves.

Coach reached out and put her hands on Sam's shoulders. She turned him around slowly.

She read his name off the back of his jersey. "Sam," she said. "Welcome to the team, Sam."

It was the first time anyone had welcomed Sam to a team, ever.

For the first half an hour they did calisthenics. Coach walked among them and shouted encouragement. "Come on, Lee ... lift those legs. Faster, Pat. You can do it. That's the spirit ... Samantha."

Samantha? Sam hadn't realized this was a coed team. He tried to spot the girl, Samantha, but because everyone was wearing helmets, he found it impossible.

It took about half an hour before the truth dawned on Sam. The coach was looking directly at *him* every time she had something to say to Samantha. Chris was wearing a pink T-shirt. Pat's blond hair was held back in a scrunchie. And Lee seemed to be wearing a sports bra.

And it was "Erin," the coach kept calling, not "Aaron." "Uh-oh," said Sam under his breath.

His suspicions were confirmed at the end of practice when Coach lined the team up and handed out the team uniforms.

It was Sam's first-ever skirt.

He could, of course, have just disappeared silently. He could have slipped away and never come back to the field hockey team. No one would have been the wiser. He could have disappeared and kept quiet until he was an

old man and secure in his place in the world. Then, when he was an old man, he could have told the story about his afternoon on the girls' field hockey team.

But before he could sneak away, something horrible happened, something that made sneaking away impossible. As Sam was leaving, the coach called out to him.

"Nice work, Samantha," said the coach.

Sam had been aching to hear those words ever since his first soccer game.

"Nice work, Samantha."

Well, not exactly those words. But they were close enough.

And that is why, instead of disappearing quietly as he should have done, instead of ghosting away, Sam went home instead and shaved his legs.

And so for three weeks that September, shaved-legged and skirted, Sam lived a lie.

And the trouble with living a lie, as any liar will tell you, is that day by day, your lie, which once seemed so preposterous to you, becomes less and less preposterous and more and more normal.

Almost anyone can become comfortable in a skirt.

And Sam's skirt was making him so happy—or, more to the point, he was happy when he was wearing his skirt—because, who would have guessed, after all those years, it turned out field hockey was Sam's game.

So can you blame him? Can you blame him that one night, after dinner, safe and all alone in his bedroom,

Sam put his skirt on and spent an hour working out some game moves in front of his mirror?

He hadn't thought it through. He hadn't imagined what his father might think if he walked into his bedroom and found his son spinning around in front of the mirror, wearing a skirt and holding a Lady Bic razor in his hand. Sam stopped spinning, and father and son stared at each other for an unspeakably long moment.

Then they both started to speak at once, each talking over the other, and each then stopping in unison.

"Sorry," said Dave. "You go."

"No," said Sam. "You."

And there was another uncomfortable silence.

And then Sam said, "I have a secret." Sam said, "I have been living a secret life."

Dave said, "You don't have to tell me this," adding *please* under his breath. *Please don't tell me*, thought Dave.

"I have to tell you this," said Sam.

"Of course you do," said Dave. "It's okay. Tell me."

"This is hard for me," said Sam.

"Me too," said Dave.

"I have been dressing up like a girl," said Sam.

"People do that," said Dave. "Though mostly they're girls. But not always."

"It's worse," said Sam. "I have been pretending to be a girl. I have been wearing this at school."

"And you like it?" said Dave.

"Like it? I love it," said Sam. "But ..."

"You feel like you aren't being honest," said Dave.

"Exactly," said Sam.

"And you want ..." said Dave. "You want to come out ... and be honest."

"That's it exactly," said Sam.

Oh my God, thought Dave. He had never seen it coming.

Dave wanted so badly to say the right thing. This was his moment. He was at the plate, and the ball was coming towards him. This was the only chance he was going to get. He had to hit it out of the park.

"I mean, you must know that, well, Mr. Martin, for instance. I don't know if he wears skirts exactly, but he, you know, he's ... you know he lives with Phil, and we—Mommy and I—we go out with Phil and Martin sometimes. And they have been to the house for dinner."

There was another long silence. The two of them stared at each other. Dave nodded, his eyes unnaturally wide. "We are okay with that," he said, pleased with himself.

Sam stared still, incredulously.

"What are you talking about?" asked Sam.

It was Morley who sorted everything out. It was Morley who phoned the school and found out that it was perfectly all right for boys to play on the field hockey team. In fact, boys and girls were allowed to play on any of the teams at Sam's new school. It was Morley who found out that Sam could go to the next field hockey game in his shorts.

And it was Morley who told him the skirt was called a kilt, and that years ago Scottish warriors wore them on the

battlefields. But Sam didn't pay much attention to this. He had already decided he would keep wearing the skirt.

"Everyone on the team wears one," said Sam.

It was a good season for the team, and a great season for Sam. In the last game of the year, the championship game, with five minutes to play and Sam's team ahead by one goal, a shot came in from the wing with "goal" written all over it. It came low and hard and fast, heading for the far corner, and Sam, who was out of position, started to run. He ran and ran, and then, when he saw that he had run out of time, he launched himself at the ball, flying through the air, his blocker hand stretched out. The ball sailed towards the goal, and Sam sailed towards the ball, everyone yelling, "Get it! Get it!" And then no one was yelling anymore. The yelling stopped, and it was just Sam and the ball. He had never jumped like this in his life. Jumping and reaching and then tumbling head over heels and coming to a full stop, holding his blocker out in front of him as if the world would end if it missed the ball.

He felt the ball whack against the edge of his hand, but he couldn't see where it had gone. Then he was tumbling and rolling as a cheer roared up around him. He scrambled to his feet, backing into position, trying to see who was cheering—his team or the opposing girls. This is the moment he will remember for the rest of his life: the moment in grade seven when he ran across the goal and jumped and fell, head over heels, and lifted his

head to see *his* team cheering his save. That moment and the moment just after, when all the girls on his team, the girls from the far end of the field and the girls from the bench, were running towards *him*, whooping and screaming with delight.

When the girls got to Sam, they jumped around him, hugging him and slapping him on the back. And while they were hugging him and slapping him, Sam looked towards the sidelines and saw Mark Portnoy standing there. Mark, the big bruiser, who had teased him relentlessly over the years and caused him so much pain, looked stunned, as if suddenly the world didn't make sense. Sam will remember that too: how Mark Portnoy stared at him with an open-mouthed look of disbelief and—as the girls hugged Sam—envy.

Sam had been worried about middle school. And he will be worried about high school when he gets there, too. But standing on the field on that warm spring afternoon, surrounded by his cheering teammates and watching Mark watch him, it was beginning to dawn on Sam that his future might be brighter than he had thought. Sam had always had trouble figuring out the rules, but maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have to. Maybe, if he kept hanging in, the rules would change to suit him, and maybe, if he were lucky, the game would change too.