

Frog Legs

A city-wide championship match in a city with a half-million population is a big deal. This particular contest was for the junior high volleyball championship. Since junior highs didn't allow students to attend away games, Daniel Hunt, a teacher, was the team's lone supporter. He drove eight miles across town and beat the team on the yellow school bus by fifteen minutes. He parked behind three Mercedes on the south side of Longfellow Junior High

Entering by a gate in the chain-link fence, Hunt climbed to the top of the metal risers flanking the outdoor court. He settled his tall, lanky frame near the top, next to Longfellow parents dressed in colorful, casual attire, chatting among themselves. Below him waved a sea of broad-brimmed hats. On either side of him, eyes were secure behind dark shades. Cheerleaders wearing an embroidered "L" on their uniforms filled the front row.

The hiss of the bus braking announced the arrival of the Tioga team. Dressed in faded purple and gold uniforms, the team, with coach Ed Norris, poured out onto a sizzling sidewalk. Chia, the shortest boy on the team, brought up the rear.

Spectators and cheerleaders gave the visiting Tioga team a quick nod, but when the Longfellow boys paraded out of their locker rooms in bright, new uniforms with matching tennis shoes, they raised a rousing cheer. The Longfellow boys fanned out and began warming up, leaping, spiking, placing the ball with confidence in the opposite court, and putting a mean spin on overhand serves.

The Tioga team spiked and set well, too, but the Longfellow boys were taller and had the home-court advantage. Their cheerleaders, cute to the nails, went through practiced routines: arms up, arms down, jump, and spin, pompoms shimmering. They beamed with precise smiles radiating Longfellow enthusiasm.

Tioga Coach Ed Norris, a science teacher and former pro-basketball player, stood like a sentinel, watching his boys warm up. They were set to play the only other undefeated team in the

city. When one of his team made a mistake, Norris's style was to let the boy take responsibility for it without a negative word. All the boys on his team got playing time.

With courts chosen by a coin toss, teams gathered around their coaches for a pep talk. Both teams joined hands and shouted. Cheerleaders took their seats as teams poured onto the court. A blast from the referee's whistle and play began.

The first serve, by Longfellow, was an ace. The Tioga team looked puzzled, like, *Who should have got that?* When Tioga finally managed to return the ball, Longfellow sent it back again. Poised and cool despite the heat rising from the court, taller boys ran up eight unanswered points, halfway to a win before Tioga got its first score.

The first game ended, 15 to 5. Longfellow spectators and cheerleaders, only one game away from the championship, broke out in rousing shouts, anticipating another easy win. Hunt wondered if some of the Longfellow parents might leave since they seemed to have the trophy sewed up. On the other hand, he had never seen parents leave with their players so near a victory. Hunt considered leaving, but he too stayed. He noticed a glint in Chia's eyes. He was enjoying the game despite losing.

Though short, Chia came well-equipped for a sport that requires a player to maneuver an eight-foot-high net. Near the door to Hunt's classroom at Tioga sat a box containing homemade reed balls about 6 inches in diameter. On the lawn outside the door, before school each day, Chia played *Qtaw*, a traditional Hmong game with some similarities to volleyball, exceptions being that players may not use their hands, and players do a handstand to spike the ball with their feet.

When Coach Norris announced tryouts, Hunt mentioned them to Chia. Chia hesitated. Putting himself forward was a notion unfamiliar to him. Still, he showed up. Coach Norris wondered about his size. However, when Chia took his turn in the rotation, his quickness and jumping ability impressed Norris. Chia ran drills as well as most of the boys, so Norris had no misgivings about putting him on the roster.

Near the end of the second game on the scorching tarmac, the score stood at thirteen to ten in Longfellow's favor. They needed only two points to seal the victory and be off to a pizza party.

Spectators were on their feet, shouting along with the cheerleaders. The boy opposite Chia spiked the ball, barely missing Chia's head, putting Longfellow only one point away from victory.

Then, as will happen, the momentum shifted. Tioga began to score, moving up point by point, finally passing their opponents. With a little luck, skill, and consistency, the Tioga boys fought to a sixteen to fourteen win, making a third game necessary. A puzzled silence fell over the spectators.

While the Longfellow coach had burnt up a lot of his team's energy using his best players without a break for the first two games, Norris continued to rotate his players. His face showed neither delight nor apprehension. The perspiration on his forehead could have been nothing more than the weather. Sounds from the fans had grown sporadic. Only individual shouts punctuated the silence.

When the referee called the third game, the Tioga boys gathered around Norris, who towered over them. After he said a few words, hands overlapped, they gave the traditional shout. The boys moved to the other side of the net, reminding Hunt of stories Chia had told about his family fleeing across the Mekong River after the Vietnam War.

The lead in the third game went back and forth. Spectators seemed concerned, but cheerleaders, still in perfect time, encouraged their team. The air of superiority of the Longfellow team had given way to frustration. Perspiration dotted the shirt of the player opposite Chia. His hair ruffled. His jump had lost its snap. When he spiked, a grimace indicated he was digging deep for stamina. When Chia blocked his spike, the tall boy's face contorted. He glared at Chia and scraped his foot across the asphalt a couple of times like an animal eager to charge.

Looking at him, Hunt thought, "A couple of horns and a flashing tail, and that kid would look right at home in a bullfighting ring."

When the tall boy tried to block Chia's spike, at the very last second Chia would send the ball in a different direction, or he barely tipped the ball so it dribbled down the other side of the net making it difficult to return. When Tioga moved to only one point away from defeating Longfellow, an ominous silence fell over unbelieving fans. Hunt shook his head, finding it hard to believe what he was seeing, and wondering what was going through Chia's mind.

On the day following the match, students came after hours to play board games in Hunt's classroom. Other students had partners, so Hunt offered to play Chia a game of chess. They moved two desks to face each other, laid out the board, and Chia opened with his knight. "How'd you like that third game?" Hunt asked.

"Are you sure want to hear this? Should I say what happened?" After a moment, Chia began to describe the scene.

The player opposite him, under his breath, with just the hint of a smile, said, "Frog legs." At every opportunity, he looked Chia straight in the eye and repeated, "Frog legs."

The sounds of English l's and r's were still jumbled in Chia's brain. He finally figured out the words the boy was repeating, but he still couldn't understand why the boy was saying those two words. Was there something bad about frogs' legs? They're strong. They enable frogs to move on land and in the water. They're good to eat.

Finally, Chia sensed the boy was saying something about his body. It had never occurred to Chia there was anything remarkable about his body, certainly nothing he should be ashamed of. Gradually Chia began to think of his legs in a way he never had before.

As the taunts continued, Chia sensed the boy's embarrassment at losing a volleyball championship to a team from across town composed mostly of interlopers in his country. But that knowledge didn't take the sting out of the words. "Frog legs," like the blows of an ax, echoed again and again. When the game point was called, Chia was in the center of the net, face to face with his tormentor. The ball came to the right. His teammate set it up for Chia. As he leaped to spike the ball, the last words he heard were, "Frog legs."

Hunt wanted to say, "You should have stepped under the net and let him have it!" Instead, he said, "Why didn't you push back? He would have deserved anything you gave him."

"I wouldn't do that," Chia said without emotion. "Someday that boy will remember what he did, and he'll feel sorry about it."

Hunt was beginning to boil. He wanted Chia to understand. If someone does something underhanded, speak up. Demand your rights.

“Chia,” he urged, “unsportsmanlike conduct is dirty. No good coach wants to win like that. You should have told your coach or the referee. The boy needed to be called on it. That’s only fair.”

Chia said, “Being fair makes people equal.” With eyes still lowered, he continued as if instructing a simple child. “I don’t want to be equal to that boy. I don’t choose that.”

Hunt saw the logic. Responding to bad behavior with bad behavior would make two people equal—equally bad. He had heard of returning good for evil but had never taken it seriously. Now, he was seeing it demonstrated by a 13-year-old boy!

Chia continued, “I waited until the boy jumped to block. As he started down, I put the ball between his open arms.”

When the winning ball landed in Longfellow’s court, the Tioga team cheered, which they quickly muted, as Norris had taught them. There was no crowing, and there was no ceremony. The trophy would come in the mail. The spectators milled about. Was the pizza party still on? The cheerleaders faded quickly as the two teams passed by in a line, each player giving the boys on the other team a high five.

Ed, still with sober face, shook hands with the Longfellow coach and the referee. The Tioga boys picked up their gear and headed for the bus. As the team filed past the bleachers where Hunt waited, Chia looked up. Hunt thought he saw just the trace of an answering smile.