

Risky Decisions

“John.”

“Sarah.”

“Brian.”

“Striker.”

Striker walked over to join his teammates. He was at P.E., and teams were being picked for a game of dodgeball they were about to play. Striker really liked P.E., and dodgeball days were especially exciting.

“Ralph.”

“Oh great,” thought Striker, as Ralph walked over to the other team. “This should be fun.” And sure enough, Ralph immediately turned around and pretended to aim at Striker.

“Courtney.”

“Ryan.”

“Bill.”

Bill jogged over to Striker. “All right!” he said, giving Striker a high five. “I’m ready for some action!” He laughed. “And I hope you’re ready to run! Ralph’s been glaring at you since we got out here.”

“I know,” said Striker. “Good thing he’s such a bad shot.”

The two boys sat back and watched the rest of their classmates be divided into the two teams. Jim Montoya was the last player picked.

“Man,” whispered Bill, as Jim ran to join their team, “you know you’re bad when your own best friend won’t pick you until last.”

And it was true. Jim’s best friend Zack Marcus was one of the team captains, but still, Jim was the last person picked.

“Yeah,” agreed Striker quietly. “I’m not surprised though. Jim’s pretty good most of the time, but when he forgets his glasses, he’s nothing but a target.”

“He forgets his glasses a lot,” said Bill.

“I know,” said Striker. “I heard his mom yelling at him about it before school one day. It was embarrassing.”

The two teams lined up on opposite sides of the gym and picked up the rubber balls. Their P.E. teacher checked to make sure everyone was ready, and then blew his whistle. Pandemonium broke out. Balls were flying everywhere, and Striker was enduring almost a constant stream of balls thrown at him from Ralph. He had to spend so much time jumping out of the way that, for a full five minutes, he didn’t get one chance to throw a ball himself.

At one point, Striker jumped out of the way of a fastball thrown by Ralph just in time for it to slam into Jim who had been standing behind him. Without his glasses, Jim didn’t even see it coming. “You’re out,” called the P.E. teacher.

“I know, I know,” muttered Jim. “Big surprise.” On his way to the sideline, he was hit by several more throws. The balls kept nailing Jim from behind, and then bouncing off every which way. Towards the end, it seemed like he didn’t even notice them anymore.

The next morning, Striker arrived at school a little early, so he headed for the playground to kill time before school started. When he reached the playground, he found a big group of kids already gathered. They were all crowded around the basketball court, but he couldn’t see what they were looking at. He walked up behind the crowd, when a girl turned around in front of him. It was Sheila.

“Hey, Sheila,” said Striker, swallowing hard. “What’s going on?”

“Hi, Striker! Someone just got in trouble for walking in the wet concrete.”

“What wet concrete?” asked Striker, still trying to see.

“Look,” Sheila moved over a little so that Striker could just see through a crack between the people.

Apparently, the floor of the concrete basketball court had been re-laid early that morning, and so now a smooth lake of wet concrete stretched out in front of Striker. Just for a moment, Striker had the itching sensation that he really, really wanted to leave his footprints, or initials, or something, in the fresh concrete that seemed to be waiting just for him. He tried to get a hold on himself, reminding himself just how much trouble he'd be in for leaving his mark.

Finally, Striker took a deep breath and managed to say, "I'm glad they fixed the court. But, what's the problem?"

"Can't you see?" asked Sheila. "Look right over there... by the goal..."

Striker squinted, wishing that there weren't quite so many people in front of him, and finally spied what looked like footprints in the concrete.

"So someone else must have had the same urge I had," thought Striker. "There's just something about wet concrete."

The footprints started at the edge and headed towards the middle for about 5 yards or so. Then, the footprints wandered around in crazy circles as if the person wasn't quite sure where they were going or what they were doing. Finally, the footprints led back out of the middle to the same edge, leaving behind them a trail of ruined concrete.

"Wow," breathed Striker. "Someone's going to get in trouble for that. Didn't they see that huge sign?"

And indeed, there beside the court was a large yellow sign reading "WET CONCRETE-- Stay off the Court!"

"Somebody already has gotten in trouble for it," said Sheila. "And you should have seen Ms. Peters when she caught him—she was as red as a fire truck! I felt so bad for Jim!"

"Jim?" thought Striker. "Uh oh. I hope it wasn't Jim Montoya."

But sure enough, right then he saw Jim walking out of the school building, with an angry-looking Ms. Peters behind him. He was barefoot and was holding his gym shoes in his hand.

"Now put your extra shoes on," said Ms. Peters. "And I don't want to hear that you've even looked at that basketball court, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Jim quietly.

Ms. Peters turned and stalked back to the building.

Just then, Bill came up behind Striker and Sheila. "Hey, guys, what's going on?"

Striker filled him in.

“Whoa,” said Bill. “I’m gonna go ask Jim why he’s not in more trouble or something. I’m surprised they’re letting him back out on the playground!”

Bill ran over to Jim, had a quick conversation, and then hurried back.

“Of all the luck!” exclaimed Bill. “Guess why Jim’s not in trouble?”

“I dunno,” said Sheila.

“Why?” asked Striker.

“Because he forgot his glasses!”

“What does that have to do with it?” asked Sheila.

“Don’t you get it? Jim couldn’t read the sign! He didn’t even know the concrete was wet. He was halfway across the court before he realized that something was sticking to his shoes!”

“And so he didn’t get in trouble?” said Sheila.

“How could he?” asked Bill. “I mean, he should have had his glasses with him, but otherwise, it wasn’t really his fault.”

“Man,” said Striker. “He *is* lucky.”

That day at P.E., they were again about to start a game of dodgeball. They had the same two captains from the day before.

“I wish I could be a captain,” Bill complained to Striker as the teams started being picked. “How come they always get to do it?”

“Oh, come on,” said Striker. “You know it goes by weeks. Maybe you’ll get to be one next week.”

“But we’ll be playing badminton next week. That’s not as important as dodgeball!”

Striker laughed.

They had been so busy talking that they hadn’t been paying attention to the names being called out.

“Striker!” said Mr. Adams. “Your name was just called. Go join your team.” He gestured to Zack’s team.

“Sorry,” said Striker, hurrying to his team. He joined the group, taking his place by Jim.

“Wait a minute,” thought Striker. “Jim?”

He turned to check again, and sure enough, there was Jim standing next to him, already on the team.

“Jim,” started Striker, “not to be rude or anything...but what are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?” asked Jim. “Zack picked me. He is my best friend, you know.”

“I know...” said Striker, “But... when did he pick you?”

“First,” said Jim.

“Really?” asked Striker before he could stop himself.

Jim shrugged. “I guess he decided to take a chance on me today.”

Striker had a perplexed look on his face that Jim couldn’t help but notice.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Striker was quiet for a second, and then said, “You walked across that concrete this morning on purpose, didn’t you?”

How did Striker know?

Solution

People take risks all the time, but they want to balance those risks with whether or not they think they'll pay off in the end. If people don't think a risk will pay off, they generally don't take it. That's why Jim's best friend Zack wouldn't pick Jim for his team whenever Jim forgot his glasses. Without his glasses, Jim just wouldn't play well, so Zack would always pick someone else first. Jim was a bad risk.

That's why when Zack suddenly did pick Jim first, Striker knew that something had changed. Either Zack didn't care about taking a bad risk anymore, which was unlikely, or Jim was no longer a bad risk. Zack must have known that Jim was somehow able to play well, even without his glasses.

If Jim could play well without his glasses, that led Striker to the most obvious conclusion: Jim had contacts. And if Jim had contacts, that meant that he could have read the "WET CONCRETE" sign that morning.

When Striker explained all this to Jim, Jim reluctantly admitted that he was right.

"But I didn't mean to walk across the concrete." Jim told Striker, "I just couldn't help it! It was calling to me... And after I did it, the only way I could get out of trouble was by pretending I couldn't see the sign. You've got to understand!"

Fortunately for Jim, Striker understood all too well the lure of wet concrete.

"I won't tell on you," said Striker, "but only on two conditions. First, that in a couple of days, you'll tell everyone you got contacts. Don't keep hiding it, or you might be tempted to do something else."

Jim nodded.

"And second..."

After the dodgeball game that afternoon, everyone was talking about how badly Jim had played.

"Jim was terrible! I mean, he certainly did throw a lot of balls, but they were all at his own teammate!"

"Yeah, I know. I've never seen anything like it!"

“He must have tagged him about 25 times!”

“Probably more than that! Poor Ralph... He never knew what hit him.”