

FRED BOWEN
SPORTS STORY

**WINNERS
TAKE ALL**

FRED BOWEN




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Photo of Christy Mathewson courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY.

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Summary: When Kyle fakes a catch, his baseball team goes on to win the league championship but Kyle doesn't feel good about winning by cheating. Includes a section on the sportsmanship of Christy Mathewson, a pitcher who played professional baseball in the early 1900s.

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ONE

Rally caps!” Kyle Holt shouted as he marched down the Reds bench. All at once, his teammates turned their caps around. They were pumped. It was the top of the sixth, the last inning of the game. The Reds were down 3–2 against the Cubs, their archrivals. It was definitely time for rally caps.

Kyle was too nervous to sit down. He leaned forward against the tall chain-link fence in front of the Reds bench, his hands clutching a couple of high links. Nate Bloom and Claire Jenkins, his teammates and best friends, were pressed against it too.

“Down by a run,” Nate said, shaking his head. “We gotta come back.”

“Yeah,” Claire agreed. “Or we’ll be one game behind the Cubs in the standings with only two games left to play.”

“Yeah, and if the Cubs win, they’ll never let us forget it,” Kyle said.

The Reds and the Cubs were the top teams in the eleven- and twelve-year-olds’ Rising Stars League. And they were locked in a tight battle for first place—with only ten days left in the season.

The bleachers were packed with parents, brothers, sisters, friends, and neighbors—practically half the town. Nobody wanted to miss this game.

Kyle looked out onto the field past second base to the wooden fence lining the outfield and to the thick woods behind it. This was his favorite place in the world—especially when the Reds were playing the Cubs.

Alana Garvey, the Reds leadoff batter this inning, came up to bat.

“Come on, Alana,” Kyle called out.

“You go, girl!” Claire yelled.

The first pitch came in a little high. Alana chased it and popped up to the shortstop.

One out.

Kyle, Nate, and Claire watched silently as Alana trudged off the field. Dylan Reffe was up next. Claire crossed her fingers against the fence.

“Come on, Dylan!” Nate shouted. “Start us off.”

Dylan smacked the ball into center field and raced to first base. Kyle, Nate, and Claire went wild, cheering and pounding the fence. Everyone on the Reds bench jumped to their feet and started pounding the fence too.

Coach Daye’s voice quickly cut through the cheers: “Salvador, you’re up. Kyle’s on deck. Nate’s in the hole.”

Kyle grabbed a bat and took some practice swings as Salvador Rodriguez struck out on three blazing fastballs.

“Two outs!” Bryan Ford, the Cubs catcher, shouted as he held up two fingers.

Kyle took his stance, spreading his feet out in the batter’s box and tapping the plate with his bat.

“Well, well, look who’s gonna make the

last out,” Bryan taunted Kyle from under his mask.

Kyle tried to ignore Bryan, like he always did.

The first pitch streaked across the outside corner.

Strike one!

“No batter!” Bryan yelled as he tossed the ball back. “What’s the matter, Kyle?” he sneered. “Too fast for you?”

Kyle stepped out of the batter’s box and glanced at Bryan. *I’d like to punch that guy*, he thought.

“Just meet it. Only takes one!” someone shouted from the stands. Kyle knew the voice right away. It was his dad’s. His dad came to all the games and always cheered the loudest.

“Swing level!” his father yelled.

Kyle choked up on his bat and stepped back into the box. His eyes narrowed as the second pitch spun toward him.

Crack!

Kyle banged a grounder clear into left field. Dylan cruised into second and Kyle reached first with time to spare.

The Reds were coming back!

Now it was up to Nate to keep the rally alive.

“Two outs. Run on anything!” Coach Daye shouted to Kyle and Dylan.

Nate crushed a line drive into the gap between two outfielders, and Dylan and Kyle took off. Dylan easily made it home to tie the game as Kyle was powering toward third. Kyle saw the third-base coach wildly windmilling his arm and turned on the jets.

He sprinted across home plate with the crowd’s cheers ringing in his ears.

The Reds had pushed ahead! The score was 4–3.

One out later, Kyle hustled out to his position in center field for the bottom of the final inning. “Come on, Reds!” he shouted as he ran. “Just need three outs.”

The first two Cubs batters popped up to the infield and the Reds moved two outs closer to the win.

“One more out,” Kyle pleaded as he pounded his glove and paced in center field.

The next Cubs batter stepped up to the

plate and settled into his stance. The first pitch was low, but the batter looped a single to left field. Now the Cubs had a runner on first with two outs, and Bryan Ford was coming to the plate.

“No batter!” Kyle yelled, but he didn’t believe it. *Bryan may be a jerk, but he is a slugger*, Kyle thought. “Move back,” Kyle called to Claire in left field, waving her back with his hand.

The first two pitches missed their mark. “Throw strikes!” Kyle shouted, sensing trouble. He didn’t want to lose this game. Not in front of all these people. Not in front of his dad.

The next pitch cut the heart of the plate. Bryan swung hard and sent the ball soaring deep into left center field. Kyle raced after it, barreling to the edge of the field.

The outfield fence came up fast, but Kyle couldn’t slow down. He pushed his right foot down in front of it and leaped as high as he could. His right hand found the top of the fence and pushed him even higher. He twisted his head back and saw the ball

falling toward him. He stretched his glove out to grab it.

The Reds hopes for first place were riding with the ball.

I've got to get it! Kyle thought.

CHRISTY MATHEWSON THE REAL STORY

Christy “Matty” Mathewson was a great pitcher who played major league ball for seventeen years—from 1900 to 1916. Any baseball record book will tell you that he was one of five players in the first group that was ever admitted to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Mr. Mathewson, who was called Big Six, stood six feet one and a half inches tall at a time when most players were much shorter. He won 373 games and lost only 188. He also had an amazing 2.13 earned-run average. That means that the other team only earned (scored) about two runs a game—not counting runs scored because someone on Mr.



Hall of Fame pitcher Christy Mathewson played major league baseball from 1900 to 1916.

Mathewson's team made an error. Mr. Mathewson also pitched eighty shutouts (games in which the other team didn't score at all).

What the record books don't tell you is that Mr. Mathewson was as famous for being a great sportsman as he was for being a great pitcher.

In the early 1900s, baseball was a rough, dirty sport. Players would break the rules if they thought it would help their team win. Fielders occasionally tripped base runners and grabbed them by the belt to slow them down. Players sometimes stomped on their opponents' feet with their spiked shoes. Hall of Famer Ty Cobb would even sharpen his spikes before games. Fights among players, fans, and even umpires were common.

Christy Mathewson became a new kind of baseball hero. As Honsey said in *Winners Take All*, he was a gentleman.

Mr. Mathewson didn't yell at the umpires, mope around when calls went against him, or quit when he was playing badly or his team was losing by a landslide. He loved winning, but when he lost he held

his head high and praised the other team for a game well played. As one reporter said: "In victory he was admirable, but in defeat he was magnificent."

He was so honest that after a controversial game during the hard-fought 1908 pennant race, Mr. Mathewson told league officials that his teammate, Fred Merkle, had not touched second base during a crucial play. Mr. Mathewson's honesty cost the Giants the game and forced a one-game playoff with the Cubs that the Giants lost. Being honest was more important to Mr. Mathewson than a pennant or even a chance at the World Series.

Mr. Mathewson was college educated at a time when most ballplayers did not even go to high school. He was an A student who starred in football, basketball, and baseball at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. Mr. Mathewson even helped write one of the first and best baseball books: *Pitching in a Pinch*.

Being a gentleman did not mean that he did not want to win. Christy Mathewson was a fierce competitor. But he didn't just

like to win at baseball. He competed intensely in every game he played. He was an ace at cards as well as a champion checkers player who could play several opponents at the same time.

But Mr. Mathewson was best at baseball. The fabulous memory that made him so good at cards and checkers helped him on the mound. Mr. Mathewson could remember every pitch from every game. If a batter hit a certain pitch hard, Mr. Mathewson would be sure not to serve up that same pitch to that batter again. Armed with pinpoint control and his famous “fadeaway” pitch (which broke in the opposite direction of most curveballs), Mr. Mathewson piled up innings and wins for the Giants.

Mr. Mathewson was at his best in the big games. In the 1905 World Series, he had the most amazing Fall Classic ever for a pitcher. Mr. Mathewson started three games against the American League champions, the Philadelphia Athletics. Three games. Three wins. Three complete game shutouts. That’s right, Christy Mathewson

pitched twenty-seven innings against the best team in the American League and did not surrender a single run. The Giants won the Series four games to one.

So Christy Mathewson knew something about winning. But he also knew what Kyle had to learn the hard way. Mr. Mathewson knew that the only real win is when you win fair and square.

* * *

Honsey was also right about golfer Tom Kite. When he was playing in the 1978 Colgate Hall of Fame Classic in Pinehurst, North Carolina, he faced a small putt on the fifth green in the final round. He was just a couple of strokes behind Tom Watson, who was in the lead. Just before Mr. Kite was about to knock his ball into the hole, he saw it move. Nobody else did. According to the rules, a golfer gets a penalty of one stroke if the ball moves—even a little—while the golfer is lined up to hit it. So when Mr. Kite's scorekeeper was about to mark down

four strokes for the hole, Mr. Kite told him to mark down five. He finished the tournament one stroke behind Mr. Watson!

He didn't get the trophy that year, but the following year Mr. Kite was recipient of the Bob Jones Award—the United States Golf Association's highest award presented for outstanding sportsmanship.

Tom Kite is not the only good sport in golf. Justin Leonard had the same thing happen to him in the Kemper Open in June 2000. Leonard played by the rules and counted the extra stroke.

The stroke did not cost Justin Leonard the tournament—he finished two strokes behind the winner—but it did cost him about \$144,000 in prize money.