

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Kid Who Only Hit Homers

by
Matt Christopher

Book Information

Matt Christopher, The Kid Who Only Hit Homers

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Interest Level: MG

A boy becomes a phenomenal baseball player one summer when a mysterious player resembling Babe Ruth befriends him.

Topics: Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3; Series, Matt Christopher; Series, Matt Christopher Sports Stories; Series, New Matt Christopher Sports Library; Sports/Recreation, Baseball

Main Characters

Coach Stan Corbin the Redbirds' head coach

Dad Sylvester's father

George Baruth a mysterious man who helps Sylvester become a good ballplayer

Jim Cowley the Redbirds' second baseman; he is a supportive teammate

Mom Sylvester's mother

Mr. Beach the Redbirds' assistant coach

Mr. Johnson a magazine representative who offers Sylvester a contract to publish Sylvester's biography

Snooky Malone a curious boy who is interested in Sylvester's sudden success

Sylvester Coddmyer III (Syl) a junior high boy who hopes to become a great baseball player

Vocabulary

celebrity someone famous in popular culture

contract a written agreement

glutton a person who eats too much

oozing spilling or overflowing from the inside

stammered spoke in a shaky or broken way

Synopsis

Sylvester Coddmyer III is a boy who loves baseball but lacks the skill and confidence of a good player. Then he meets George Baruth. Mr. Baruth urges Sylvester to attend practice and try out for the Hooper Redbird team despite Sylvester's fear that he will constantly sit on the bench. After some individual practice with Mr. Baruth, Sylvester fields and bats well during the next team practice, and Coach Corbin puts Sylvester on the roster.

The Redbirds play their initial practice game against the Falcons. Sylvester strikes out in his first time at bat, but he later makes a good catch and hits a single. Because Sylvester's performance is somewhat disappointing compared to the previous practice, Coach Corbin says Sylvester may be on the bench most of the time. Sylvester's hopes of being a great baseball player, however, do not die. Later, as he writes his English paper on Babe Ruth, Sylvester wonders if his own name could some day be well-known.

During the first league game, Sylvester miraculously hits three home runs and makes a one-handed catch. Mr. Baruth observes the action from his spot in the third row of bleachers. After an intense last inning, the Redbirds win their first game and Sylvester is mobbed by admiring fans.

As the season continues, Sylvester becomes the star player of the Redbirds and moves into the fourth-batter position. Mr. Baruth sits in his usual spot at each game, though other spectators in the bleachers seem unaware of his presence. The Redbirds suffer a disappointing loss when Sylvester, ill from overeating, misses a game; they move on, though, to establish a solid, winning record. The coaches are amazed, and the Hooper fans are excited. Sylvester himself cannot explain his outstanding performance; it just seems to happen. On the other hand, a local boy named Snooky Malone credits Sylvester's success to his astrological sign and the occult.

Eventually fame comes to Sylvester. The local

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newspaper lauds Sylvester's perfect batting average, and Sylvester is tempted by offers of a biography and TV show appearances. Sylvester declines, however, after Mr. Baruth points out the negative aspects of fame. Mr. Baruth seems satisfied with Sylvester's decision and says good-bye, leaving Sylvester on his own.

Without George Baruth's presence at the final game, Sylvester strikes out in his first time at bat. After some missed plays in the field and another strikeout, Sylvester finally hits a double and brings in two runs. However, the Redbirds lose their final league game 8 to 6. Sylvester thinks his fans may have forgotten him, but they crowd around to praise him. Moments later, Coach Corbin awards Sylvester a huge trophy, and Sylvester happily walks home with his mother and Snooky.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At first, Sylvester decides that he should not sign up for baseball. He feels that his stocky build and short legs make him a poor runner, and he is often teased because he is a poor batter and fielder. Sylvester also fears that he will sit on the bench for the entire season if he does sign up. Do you agree with Sylvester's decision based on these reasons?

Student answers will vary. Some students may say that being teased is not fun, and that Sylvester should look for another activity in which he can excel. Other students may feel that, with practice, Sylvester's skills would improve; these students may conclude that Sylvester's fear may prevent him from improving. Finally, some students may point out that it is not important to be the best, or even good, at an activity; these students may suggest that Sylvester's camaraderie with the team and his satisfaction in knowing that he is trying his best should outweigh his poor performance and the teasing.

Literary Analysis

Sylvester is eventually offered the fame that he seems to want in the beginning of the story, yet he turns down Mr. Johnson's offer. Why did Sylvester change his mind?

George Baruth seems to have a great influence on Sylvester, not only on his baseball performance but also on Sylvester's feelings about himself. Baruth warns Sylvester that fame can be dangerous and possibly ruinous. He tells Sylvester not to become "swellheaded" with all of the praise, and he says that others may be delighted when Sylvester can no longer maintain his miraculous batting and fielding performance. With this advice in mind, Sylvester realizes that his respectable, but far from outstanding, performance in the last game still garners him support from family and friends. He no longer needs to be a "superstar" in order to feel accepted.

Inferential Comprehension

What evidence from the story suggests that George Baruth is not a real, living person?

On several occasions George Baruth seems to know what Sylvester is thinking. For instance, Mr. Baruth knows Sylvester lied to Jim Cowley about his reason for not signing up to play. Also, Mr. Baruth claims to be vacationing in the area, yet no one seems to know him or even see him. Sylvester's mother does not see him when he visits Sylvester at their house, nor does Snooky see him as he talks with Sylvester. Sylvester's baseball skills provide further evidence; he magically improves when Mr. Baruth is present. In addition, Mr. Baruth's twinkling eyes, mentioned several times, suggest the presence of a magical being.

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Constructing Meaning

Do you think Mr. Baruth should have helped Sylvester?

Student answers may differ. While some students may feel that Sylvester's self-confidence needs building before he can succeed, others may argue that it is not fair for Sylvester to receive magical help to accomplish this goal. Students may also suggest that not everyone would respond to the situation as Sylvester does. They may feel that it is dangerous to give someone the ability to hit homers every time, because the person may become not only self-confident but also a braggart.

not Sylvester's official coach, he still helps Sylvester immensely. Point out that good coaching often consists of more than teaching skills. Discuss the traits of a good coach, not only in sports but for other activities as well. Have students tell or write about someone in their own lives who has given them valuable guidance.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors In chapter four Sylvester completes an English paper on Babe Ruth. Review the information Sylvester finds and discuss what additional information would be interesting to know. Next, have students use available resources to find information about their own favorite athletes, past or present. Students could design small posters to display their findings creatively.

Differentiating Fact and Opinion As Sylvester's popularity on the ball field grows, the local newspaper covers his success. Have students locate the articles that appear in the *Hooper Star* in chapters twelve and thirteen. Note that reliable news reporting consists primarily of facts, but opinion sometimes enters a story as well. Using the two articles, have students list which sentences or phrases are factual and which reflect opinions. Students should be prepared to support their choices. In addition, students could determine if the opinions seem acceptable for a newspaper article.

Making Predictions George Baruth is satisfied with Sylvester's decision to reject Mr. Johnson's offer. Have students imagine what would have happened if Sylvester had signed the contract. How would the ending, in particular, be different? Have students write a new ending for the story.

Extending Meaning Although George Baruth is
