

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Skinnybones

by

Barbara Park

Book Information

Barbara Park, Skinnybones
Quiz Number: 342
Knopf, 1997
ISBN 0-679-88792-X; LCCN
111 Pages
Book Level: 4.1
Interest Level: MG

Life looks hopeless when Alex's losing team has to play baseball against T.J.'s winning team. But Alex has a hidden talent that could save the day -- unless it ruins his life first.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; State Award

Topics: Humor/Funny, Funny; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Sports/Recreation, Baseball

Main Characters

Alex Frankovitch a young boy whose mouth gets him into trouble

Alex's father he wants his son to be proud of winning the Most Improved Player award

Alex's mother she is often annoyed with Alex's lying

Brian Dunlop Alex's friend

T.J. Stoner Alex's classmate who brags about his baseball skills

Vocabulary

bunt a sacrifice hit in baseball in which the batter intentionally hits the ball lightly

grounder a hit in baseball that causes the ball to roll across the ground rather than to travel through the air

midget an extremely small person who is otherwise normally proportioned

outfield the grass area surrounding a baseball diamond

Synopsis

Alex Frankovitch is a young boy who is very self-conscious about being short and is afraid he will not grow. Alex tries to make up for his lack of height with humor. At the beginning of the story, Alex enters a Kitty Fritters writing contest as a joke. He writes about his weird aunt who will not feed Kitty Fritters to her cat because it tastes like rubber. As he finishes writing, Alex makes his mother angry by dumping the entire bag of cat food on the kitchen floor to find the entry form. To avoid being blamed, he lies, which causes his mother to compare him to Pinocchio.

Alex and his worst enemy, T.J. Stoner, are in the same class at school. T.J. is the best Little League baseball player around and constantly brags about his ability and successes. Alex hates T.J.'s bragging, so he tries to steal the attention away by saying funny things.

Although Alex has won the Most Improved Player award every year of his Little League history, he believes this award is not a compliment, but an insult aimed at one of the worst players on the team. Another problem with baseball, in Alex's opinion, is the uniforms. He actually wears a size small uniform, but he is so embarrassed that he yells out, "Large!" when the coach asks for his size.

When T.J.'s bragging becomes too much for Alex to bear, Alex claims his coach said he threw the fastest pitch he had ever seen. T.J. then challenges Alex to a pitching contest, but Alex declines until T.J. calls him a chicken. Alex loses the contest and is humiliated.

Soon after the contest, Alex's and T.J.'s Little League teams are scheduled to play one another. T.J. announces this to the entire class, but Alex tries to deny it so no one will come. Before the game, Alex makes several pleas for God to rescue him from embarrassment, but since the pleas don't work, he is forced to play in the game. During warm-ups, though, Alex makes several good catches and his spirits lift a little. Yet, when he must bat, he becomes very nervous. He does get a hit and yells, "BOOGA BOOGA" to distract T.J. at first base. He continues

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Skinnybones

by

Barbara Park

on to second base, but the umpire calls Alex out, stating that he had interfered with the play by yelling at T.J. Alex is devastated. When he gets home, he stays in his room for almost the entire remainder of the weekend.

Alex's classmates tease him unmercifully on Monday. Near the end of the day, though, the principal congratulates T.J. on his performance in the game and also announces that Alex has won the Kitty Fritters contest. Alex is shocked. Alex's fortune finally seems to be changing when his teacher asks T.J. and Alex to come to the front of the class and answer questions like celebrities.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Throughout the story, Alex discusses his lack of friends. It seems all of his clowning has the opposite effect of what he intended. If you were in Alex's class, how would you feel about Alex? Explain.

The answers to this question will vary. Some students may answer that they would try to be Alex's friend because they empathize with him. However, some students may answer that they would not try to be Alex's friend. They might feel that Alex is too annoying and standoffish.

Literary Analysis

Alex is a boy who is very concerned about being short, so he acts as a class clown to get attention. Do you think if Alex were taller he would act the same way? Why or why not?

The answers may vary. One possible answer is that Alex would not act the same way if he were taller. Many of his actions and reactions are due to the physical differences between Alex and his classmates. If he were the same size or taller than his classmates, perhaps Alex would not feel the need to shift the attention away from his size. Because Alex is an attention seeker, however, it is possible he would still be the class clown even if he were taller. Also, if Alex were taller, it does not mean that he would be a better baseball player. In that respect, Alex might still feel the need to take attention away from T.J.

Inferential Comprehension

Do you think Alex and T.J. will ever become friends?

In the past, Alex had tried to befriend T.J. Perhaps now that Alex has had a taste of his own success, he will stop competing with T.J. and try again to be his friend. Based on Alex's descriptions of T.J., though, it is possible T.J. is too concerned with himself to be Alex's friend.

Constructing Meaning

At the end of the novel, Alex has a taste of success when he wins the Kitty Fritters contest. His teacher asks him to come to the front of the class and answer questions like a celebrity. When he is walking home from school, he even tells God that if God ever needs him, he can look Alex up in the *Yellow Pages* under "Star." Why do you think Alex says this?

Alex makes this statement because he thinks he is going to be famous. Throughout much of the novel, Alex is very insecure. He is convinced he is a terrible baseball player and is concerned about his lack of height. This statement, however, shows the reader that Alex has become more self-confident, perhaps a bit overly confident.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events Alex is very nervous about playing in the baseball game against T.J. He would rather not play at all. In spite of this, Alex does fairly well at the beginning of the game. Ask your students to pretend they are sports announcers. Have them write colorful descriptions of the game using exciting words and phrases.

Identifying Reading Strategies Much of the story involves baseball. Ask your students to list five words from the book that are associated with baseball. Next, ask them to write as many different definitions for the word as they can think of. For example, words like ball, strike, batter, pitcher, home, fouls, steal, run; and walk have many meanings. The students should then look up the definition of each word in a dictionary and compare their answers.

Identifying Persuasive Language Alex is going to be the star of a television commercial for Kitty Fritters. Divide your class into pairs. In each pair, have the students work together to write a commercial for Kitty Fritters. You may want to spend some time talking about advertising and marketing techniques beforehand. The students can then act out their commercial for the class.

Responding to Literature Alex wins the Kitty Fritters contest by writing a funny entry. Have your students write their own entries to the contest. They should answer the following sentence: "My cat eats Kitty Fritters because...." Their entries should be at least one paragraph long. If any students do not have a cat, ask them to pretend they do.