

Switch Hitters

A serial for teen readers

By John Moore

“Switch Hitters” is a fictional story that appeared in 21 weekly chapters in The Denver Post. The author was a Denver Post sports writer who also worked at The National Sports Daily in New York, Dallas Times-Herald and News & Observer of Raleigh, N.C.

CHAPTER ONE

It was 11-year-old Larry Little’s turn to bat, which meant practice was almost over. Larry was always the last up for batting practice, because he was just an afterthought on the Bobcats’ team.

Batters usually get 10 hits, run the bases, and the next player comes to bat. But manager Avery Weaver already had thrown Larry 20 pitches, and aluminum had yet to touch ball. Everything about his swing was wrong. The players in the field were getting restless.

Mr. Weaver told Larry to run the first time he made contact. The manager moved up from the mound about 10 feet closer and softly lobbed a ball underhanded. Larry, being new to the game, didn’t realize how humiliating that looked to the other players.

Larry’s next swing felt different. He took two steps toward the ball, pivoted on the wrong foot, spun all the way around, and felt ... a thud. Contact! He was off and running, or, more accurately, waddling around the bases. Larry was short for his age and carried much more weight than the other kids, and they didn’t let him forget it. But he never let it bother him. Not even David Diamond’s comment as he rounded second - “Hey, how did a guy as fat as you get a name like Little?”

Larry was oblivious to bullying. He was grinning from ear to ear when he finally reached home plate. Michelle Ramirez was standing there with the mask over her face, tossing the ball in and out of her catcher’s mitt. She

had a superior look on her face. “You didn’t hit the ball, you hit my glove, you big oaf!” she snapped. “You’re out!”

Before Larry could process the embarrassment, he was surprised to hear his father call out, “Nice running, Larry!”

Larry turned and spotted his mom and dad behind the backstop. He was happy to see their warm smiles, and soon a smile returned to his own face. Mr. Weaver ended practice and Larry ran to his parents.

Larry’s father explained that Mr. Weaver had asked to speak to them, so the four of them took seats on the dugout bench. Larry felt uneasy when Mr. Weaver asked him to sit at one end so he could talk to his parents in private. “This can’t be good,” Larry thought. “He’s not trying to get rid of me, is he?”

Larry couldn’t hear what they were saying, and it was making him anxious. He clutched the new Roy Halladay glove his parents had bought for him and nervously kicked the mud from his cleats by banging them into the fence in front of him. The kicking made the fence shake all the way down to the other end of the dugout.

“Larry, honey, please stop,” his mother called down. “Your manager is trying to talk to us.”

“Sorry,” Larry said meekly. Ever since he had recently seen a home video of “The Natural,” Larry had become obsessed with the idea of playing baseball. After four practices with the Bobcats, he was hooked. “This can’t be the end,” he thought. “Can it?”

“You were saying, Mr. Weaver?”

Larry’s father said.

“I was saying, Mr. and Mrs. Little, that, like John Madden used to say, “You always have to keep an eye out for a blind horse.”

That’s not exactly what Mr. Madden said. But Mr. Weaver was a character. He had a habit of using other people’s quotes to make a point. Unfortunately, he usually got the quotes wrong, and his point was lost. Mr. and Mrs. Little looked at each other in polite confusion.

“What I mean is that Larry would be better off playing for a lower-level team,” Mr. Weaver said. “My team has a chance to go to nationals this season, and Larry won’t get much of a chance to play. He’ll sit on the bench, and won’t learn anything.”

“But you should see how happy Larry is when he comes home from practice,” Larry’s dad said.

Weaver was surprised to hear that, given how tough the other players had been on him.

“Most of the Bobcats have been playing baseball together for four years,” Weaver went on. “Larry has been playing for four days. Now it happens we had two unexpected open roster spots this season. One went to the new boy in town, Jake Joyce. Heck of a hitter. Nobody else has spoken for the other, so Larry can have it if he wants. But it will take years for him to be as good as the others. He belongs on a team with kids who are just learning to play, like he is.”

Mrs. Little was torn. She didn’t want her son sitting in the dugout all season. What kind of lesson is that? But on the other hand, Larry had never played sports before, and it was important he learn what it means to be part of a team. And he loved this team.

Even if they clearly didn’t love him back.

“Larry,” come here,” she called down to him, and down the dugout he lumbered.

“Sweetheart, Mr. Weaver was just explaining to us that, since you are new to baseball, you are a really lucky guy. You have options for how you might best learn how to play the game.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Well, you know, most of the boys on your team are more experienced than you are, so ... wouldn’t you rather be on a team where you can learn by playing instead of watching?”

Larry didn’t like where this was going. The only uniform he wanted to wear was the Bobcats’. Period.

“I want to know what it feels like to be a winner,” he said.

“Son, no matter what you decide, and no matter how the team does, you’re a winner to us,” his father said.

Mr. Weaver wasn’t getting his point across.

“Larry,” he said, “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s whether you play the game. You won’t be playing the games. Not with this team.”

“But I’ll play in practices,” he said. “I can learn a lot that way. Please, mom and dad. Please, Mr. Weaver! I’ll keep score and keep stats and help you with strategy. Please don’t make me go!”

The adults all agreed that because the roster spot was open and uncontested, the final decision should be Larry’s. So it was settled. Larry was so excited he did a chicken dance the whole walk home with his parents.

Now there was no more doubt. Now he was a Bobcat.

His parents weren’t so sure.

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