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## IT STARTED WITH A PUNCH AND A PRODIGY

*Marissa Weiner*

I punched him. I don't remember, but I'm told I punched him. He fell onto the dewy grass, crying for all to hear. I didn't pity him; he stood in my way. Other boys and girls watched as I dribbled down the field, soccer ball tucked closely to my body so no one could steal what I worked so hard to obtain. Parents screamed from the sideline, begging the referee to stop me. I was too fast. I showed no remorse. I was Marissa Weiner, and I was the four-year-old soccer prodigy.

My soccer career began as soon as my right fist abandoned my hip and struck his cheek. I was the best of the best, and parents knew it. When they looked at the season's schedule and saw that their child's team was playing "The Lightning," they knew to dress their son or daughter in their best shin guards. They knew to bring extra orange slices for the half-time snack, because Marissa Weiner, the 4-year-old soccer prodigy, may want some. Sweatband across forehead, I was the Mia Hamm of "Soccer Tots," and people knew I was going places. Referees feared all three feet and twenty-seven pounds of me, and I feared nothing but untied laces.

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I was recruited. The best soccer club in Worthington, Ohio wanted me, Marissa Weiner, the now nine-year-old soccer prodigy, to be on their elite team, and I couldn't believe it. I grabbed my size three baby blue soccer ball, grass stained knee socks, strap-on shin guards, and blood stained Nike sweatband and was ready to meet my new team. My dad, like always, gave me a pep talk during the car ride to practice. "Don't be afraid to be selfish," he'd mutter. I was never much of a goal-scorer. I liked seeing the smiles on my teammate's faces, front teeth missing and all, when they heard the ball smack off their cleat and skim the back of the net.

As soon as I met my ten new teammates, I knew they were girls that I'd be able to count on forever. We were teammates, and teammates were for life. Jessica was the first to introduce herself. She had a curly black ponytail, and wore silver sports goggles that took up half of her face. When she took off her goggles, she had bright green eyes that lit up when she talked about her favorite soccer player, Frankie Hejduk. She told me her middle name was George, after her Grandpa. "George?" I asked, confused. "But that's a *boy's* name!" Jessica was also a fairly new member on the team, and although I mocked her middle name, she graciously took me under her wing- literally. Standing just right below her collarbones, I was the smallest on the team. But I was Marissa Weiner, the 9-year-old soccer prodigy, so this was of no concern.

My new soccer coach wore black and white Adidas Sambas shoes to each practice, had a short, military-like haircut, and was tan even during the winter months. He was kind, but intimidating- especially when he made us run “suicides” at the end of each practice.

“Speedy!” Travis yelled from his coach’s chair. I quickly stopped juggling my soccer ball and cocked my head towards him.

“Not you, Marissa,” he corrected.

“Kristen, come over here please!” I was shocked. I was Marissa Weiner, the nine-year-old soccer prodigy, speedier than all other nine-year-olds.

“Why does she get to be called Speedy?” I asked vulnerably.

“You have to earn a nickname on this team, Marissa.”

“Well, how do I ‘earn’ one?”

“You have to impress me. You haven’t done that yet”

I craved a nickname. I stayed up at night, thinking about what I’d have to do to be called something other than “Marissa.” I wanted to be “Speedy,” but I’m no Speedy II or Speedy Jr., so I would have to settle for a new nickname. Practice after practice, I awaited Travis’ nickname announcement. After dominating the sprints at practice, scoring upper ninety goals, and juggling for hours on end, Travis finally awarded me a nickname. “Mo. I’ll call you Mo.”

“Mo? Your name is MA-rissa, not MO-rissa. What are you, one of The Three Stooges?” my mother complained. “Your father and I already have a nickname for you. What’s so wrong with ‘Pickle?’” Her voice began to fade away. *Mo*. I was finally Mo, the nine-year-old soccer prodigy.

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As time went on, tall teammates shot into hoops instead of goals, skinny teammates laced their ballet shoes and pitched their soccer cleats, and strong teammates ditched the soccer field for a balance beam. I tried basketball, but was far too aggressive and far too short, and ran around like an angry leprechaun. I ventured into ballet, but couldn’t point my toes or pirouette without seeing stars. I undertook gymnastics, but feared the cheese pit. I stuck with soccer, knowing that as the twelve-year-old soccer prodigy, I couldn’t just abandon the sport.

It was my last game with Travis sitting in his coach’s chair and yelling “Go, Mo!” from the sideline. After four years of nicknaming and soccer coaching, Travis was moving to North Carolina for his new corporate job, and we were to get a new coach. Rumors quickly circulated about who was to be our new coach.

“I heard he’s a midget!”

“I heard he’s British!”

“I heard he doesn’t have teeth!”

His name was Simon. He stood at six feet two inches, and smiled with bright white teeth. He had dark brown hair, pale blue eyes, and a pointy nose that looked like a beak. He shouted “Mo” in a thick British accent that startled me, no matter how many times the syllable came off his tongue. He was cruel. He prioritized winning over fun. He was removed from games for squawking at referees. He called us “Muppets” and “train wrecks” when we missed an empty net. Friends and teammates quit. But I wasn’t sensitive. I could take it. I was Mo, the Muppet, the train wreck, the twelve-year-old soccer prodigy.

We’d practice through tornado sirens, snowstorms, and heat advisories. We’d receive text messages telling us to bring shovels to practice so we could clear off the field and prepare for our next game. We’d run for miles, our sweat and tears freezing as we ran in below zero weather. We’d bleed on ourselves and on each other. But we were good. We travelled everywhere from Las Vegas to Orlando, playing the best teams across The United States and Canada.

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I loved cleat shopping. I’d scan the rows of women’s cleats for hours, contemplating which shoe would enhance my performance. I’d always pick the flashiest, brightest pair, hoping they’d make me the center of attention, the star player. My favorite pair was deep purple with a neon yellow heel and base. I told myself they’d make me run faster, tackle harder, and shoot stronger. They never did.

I was fast, but Stephanie was faster. I was strong, but Aisha was stronger. I scored goals, but not as many as Remi. I could juggle to 500, but Maddie could juggle to 501. Despite having the best cleats, I wasn’t the best. I quickly went from MVP to just a VP. I wasn’t the prodigy I once was; I became ordinary. Referees didn’t fear me, but pitied me. I was small and sheepish, and went unnoticed. I was Mo, I was average, and I was a fifteen-year-old soccer player.

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I called her “Kels.” “Kelsey” wasn’t difficult to say; it’s just two short syllables, but I thought she deserved a nickname. She was a left midfielder, and I was a left fullback. She’d run the flank, French braid blowing in the wind, eager to score the first goal of the match. And she would, too. She’d score nearly every game, each time celebrating by leaping nearly three feet straight in the air and launching her fist above her head like John Bender in *The Breakfast Club*.

She called me “Casper,” and I hated it. I knew I didn’t tan well. I could barely look at myself in the mirror with my banana-colored uniform on without tears falling down my freckled cheeks.

“No one looks good in that God-awful color, Pickle,” my mom affirmed.

Since she was extremely thin and had legs that looked like they would snap if she didn’t wear shin guards, I decided I’d call her “chicken legs.” I wish I hadn’t. I wish I could go back and tell her that I was just jealous. I wish I had known that would be our last conversation.

When my four-year-old self threw that punch, I had no idea that twelve years later I’d attend the funeral of a teammate. I had no idea that my team and I would sit second row at the service of one of our own. I had no idea I’d watch as tears flow from Simon’s pale blue eyes. I had no idea I would stand next to Jessica, still right below her collarbones, looking at our teammate’s pale, lifeless body. I had no idea that I’d shudder when we were told to run “suicides” at practice. I had no idea that every time I braided my hair I’d think of her always-perfect French braid that was long enough to fall right between the numbers “2” and “6” on her jersey. I had no idea that every time I thought of soccer, I’d think of her.

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I never would’ve punched him if I knew what I know now. I never would’ve met her if I hadn’t punched him, if I never learned to love the game. I had no idea a two second punch would bring me fifteen years of the best combination of euphoria and misery that would be so difficult to wave goodbye to. I wish I had known how hard it would be to slip off my cleats for the last time and bid farewell to header goals and corner kicks. I wish I had known what I was in for. I wish I could go back and stop four-year-old me from making the biggest mistake of my life.

It hurt to part with the game that brought me so many happy and sad tears, but it hurt my dad more. After watching me throw punches and score goals for fourteen years, he was my biggest fan. Through sleet and below zero temperatures, I never once looked at the sideline to not see him standing there smiling and giving me a thumbs up. He was the one who woke up at five o’clock in the morning to drive me to middle-of-nowhere Kentucky while I reclined the passenger seat and slept until he swerved and loudly drove over the road’s rumble strips. I never once believed this was accidental; I was always woken up just in time for him to give me a pep talk. “Don’t afraid to be selfish, Pickle...”

The game consumed me, and I let it. I’d stay up until two o’clock in the morning, thinking about my missed shots and failed assists, trying my best to cry quietly under my sheets so my dad wouldn’t hear. I hated knowing that

I was no Mia Hamm. I hated the insults: the short jokes, the Jew jokes, the pale jokes. I hated the blisters, the never healing scabs, the turf burns, and the weeklong headaches that came from heading the ball. I hated the missed birthday parties, homecoming dances, and family gatherings. I hated knowing that I'd never again see Kelsey leap into the air after scoring a goal, smiling as best she could with her mouth guard covering her teeth. I hated knowing that no matter how hard I ran, tackled, and kicked, I'd never take home a trophy reading "MVP," "Best Defensive Player," or even "Most Improved." It hurt to continue. I had no other choice but to blow the whistle and end the game. I wanted so badly to be the best, but I already was. I was Mo, and I *was* the soccer prodigy.