

1

Just like that, it was basketball season.

It was basketball season this fast, so soon after football. Almost *too* soon for Ben McBain, even though he usually couldn't wait for the next season in sports to begin.

When you were eleven like he was, that was the beauty of sports, you didn't have to wait until next year, not if you played football and basketball and baseball the way he did in Rockwell.

Sometimes you barely had to wait at all, even if people in Rockwell still hadn't stopped talking about the way football had ended for Ben and the rest of the Rockwell Rams in the championship game against Parkerville.

So two weeks from when Ben had hit Sam Brown for a touchdown on the last play of the championship game, Ben and Sam and Cooper (Coop) Manley were on their way to Darby, next town over, for their only preseason scrimmage, one week before the season started for real, Rockwell vs. Darby again, this time in the gym at Rockwell Middle School.

They were all piled into the backseat of Mrs. Manley's car for the short ride, knowing that it was only supposed to be a

scrimmage, but also knowing Darby was their biggest rival in just about everything.

Knowing they'd want to beat Darby even if it was just a pie-eating contest.

"Are we ready for this?" Coop said now. "Because I don't know if I'm ready for this."

He had one window, Sam had the other, Ben was in between them. You could be the biggest star on the field, the way Ben had been against Parkerville, but when you were small, the way Ben was small, you still got stuck with the middle seat.

"Gotta admit," Ben said, "this is one time when even I would have been fine with a little more of a break. That way we could have celebrated for a few more days. Like guys do after they win the Stanley Cup and they travel all around with it."

"Same," Sam said. "Even though Coop would still be posing on the field next to our trophy if we didn't practically drag him away."

"He did look awfully darn cute," Mrs. Manley said from the front.

"Mom, stop," Coop said.

They were passing through Darby's downtown area, which was even smaller than Rockwell's.

"Hey," Coop said, "I hear you guys on this. It was only the greatest football game in the history of our town, even if it was a bunch of sixth graders. I'm totally not done talking about it yet."