

# Batter Up!

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 **STONE ARCH BOOKS**  
Minneapolis San Diego

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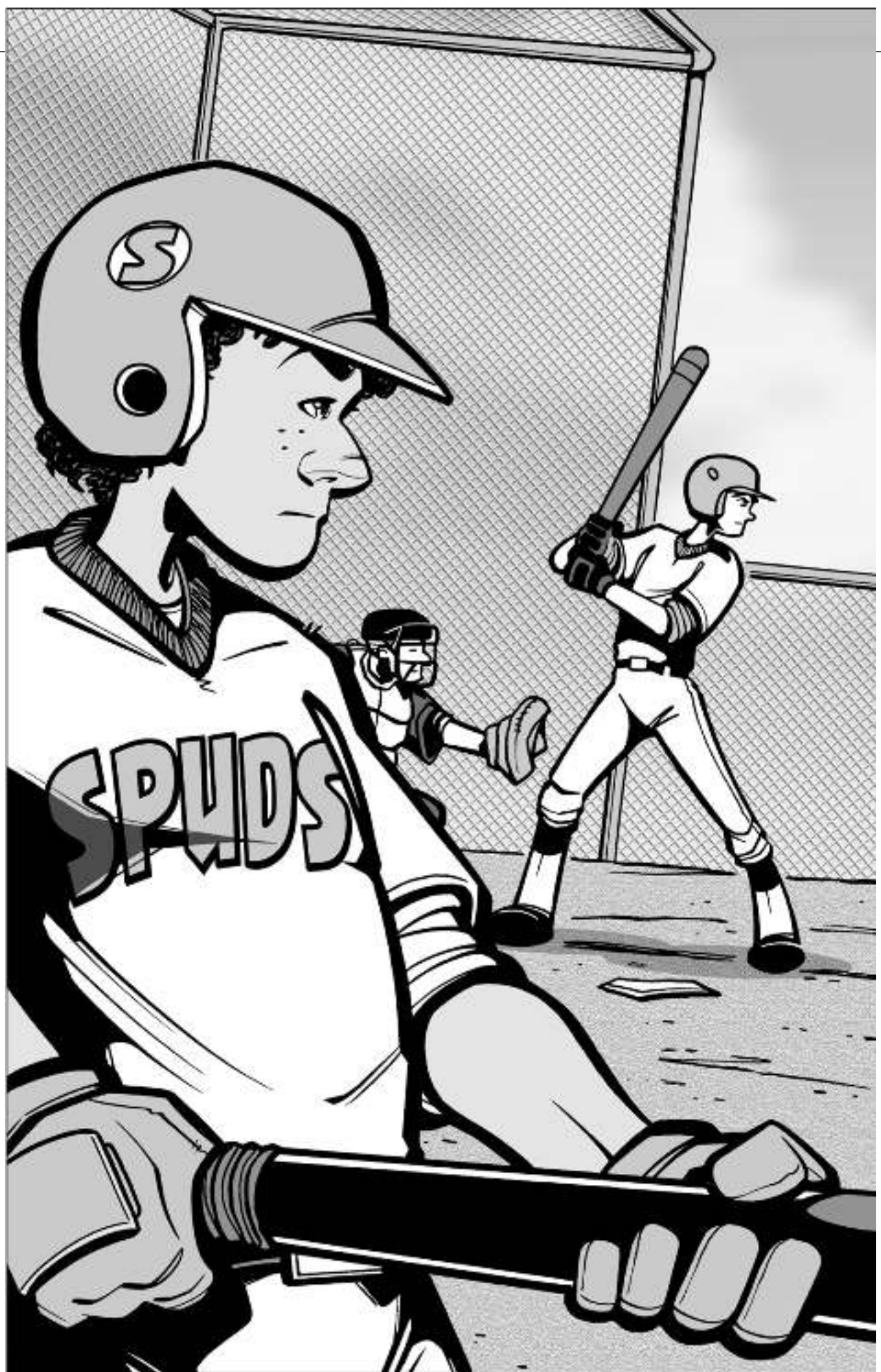
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# Chapter 1

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## DECIDING THE GAME

Caleb was on deck, waiting for his turn at bat. He watched closely as Taylor stepped into the batter's box for their team.

Secretly, Caleb wished that Taylor would strike out. Caleb didn't want to lose, but he also didn't want to bat.

It was the bottom of the last inning. Two outs. Runners on first and second. The Spuds trailed 4–3 so the outcome of the game hung in the balance.

Taylor was not a strong hitter, so Caleb knew the chance was small that he'd get the hit to win the game.

If Taylor struck out, Caleb wouldn't have to bat. And Caleb really didn't want to have to bat.

The Oilers' pitcher wound up and delivered a pitch. Taylor didn't move.

“Strike one!” the umpire bellowed.

Caleb tried not to smile.

Standing on deck, Caleb wondered where his confidence had gone.

Only last summer, Caleb was one of the best hitters in the Dayton League. He had hit more home runs than anyone, and he had one of the league's best batting averages, too.

After all, that's why Coach Bergen asked him to try out for the Spuds.

The Spuds were a traveling team. They played against teams from other cities all around the area and they competed for the District 9 Championship in the playoffs at the end of every season.

It was a much more intense league to play in than the Dayton League.

Now it was the first game of the season. The Spuds were playing against their biggest rivals, the

Oilers, who were from a neighboring town.

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It was a chance for the Spuds to start the season off on the right foot.

But for Caleb, it had started badly. In each of his first three times at bat, Caleb had struck out.

In fact, he hadn't even made contact with the ball.

"Strike two!" the umpire yelled. Taylor shook his head.

Caleb took a deep breath.

Caleb swung a bat back and forth. He stopped and eyed it. It was black and had a bright gold logo on the side.

All the other kids loved that bat, but Caleb didn't. Like all the bats the team used, it was aluminum.

But Caleb had his own bat, a wooden one, which he had used for three years.

To Caleb, the wood bat was like magic. He always came through with a hit in an important time of a game, as long as he had the wood bat.

In his old league, coach after coach had tried to get Caleb to use aluminum.

Every other kid in the league used an aluminum bat. But Caleb always stuck with his wood one, and no coach ever lived to regret letting him use it.

This year, playing for the Spuds, Caleb's coach had told him there was no way he could use the wood bat.

The pitcher stepped into his delivery. The runners edged off the bases. Taylor dug in. Caleb closed his eyes and waited for the thud of the catcher's glove.

When he heard it, he opened his eye. Taylor was bent over, holding his side. The thud had been the sound of Taylor getting hit by the pitch.

Caleb's shoulders sank.

Taylor shook off the pain and jogged down to first base. Each of the runners moved up a base. Now the bases were loaded.

Win or lose, Caleb would have to decide the game. With calls of "Come on, Caleb, you can do it!" all around him, Caleb turned around and walked slowly back into the dugout.

"Hey, Caleb!" Coach Bergen yelled from the third-base coach's box. "Where are you going?"

Caleb didn't answer. He silently walked back into the dugout. He unzipped the end of his equipment bag and pulled out his wood bat.



## Chapter 2

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### THE MAGIC BAT

Without a word, Caleb walked out of the dugout and headed back toward the batter's box.

Coach Bergen yelled, "Time out!" The umpire gave the signal, and Coach Bergen trotted toward the batter's box.

Caleb sighed. He already knew exactly what was going to happen. There was no way Coach Bergen would be okay with him using the wood bat.

Caleb would be forced to use the aluminum bat. Then he would strike out and his team would lose.

The coach walked up to Caleb and put his arm around him.

"What's going on here, Caleb?" the coach asked. "You know how the league feels about kids using wood bats."

"Yes, I know," Caleb said. "But I don't like the aluminum ones and I've always felt great with this bat in my hands. Here. Hold it."

Caleb handed the bat to Coach Bergen.

"You're right, Caleb," the coach said. "It feels great."

The coach made a few practice swings with the wood bat. Then he handed it back to Caleb.

Coach Bergen sighed. He said, "The problem is, if you use this bat, they are only going to pitch you inside."

Caleb nodded. "I know. I'm used to that," he said.

The coach shook his head. "I know you are," he said.

He looked at Caleb for a moment. Then he continued, "With an aluminum bat, you can fight that pitch off and still hit it out of the infield. A wood bat might break, and then we'd be done."

Caleb could hear the murmurs of the players in the field.

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“Is he really going to use a wood bat?” one of them said. “That’s old school!”

Caleb looked Coach Bergen in the eye.

“Please, let me use it this one time,” Caleb said. “If I don’t get a hit, I’ll put it away for the rest of the year. I promise. Just give me this one shot, Coach.”

Coach Bergen thought for a second. Then he nodded. He turned and jogged back to the third-base coach’s box.

A wide grin swept across Caleb’s face.

Suddenly, it didn’t matter that winning or losing the game was in his hands. It didn’t matter that he had struck out three times. It didn’t matter that this was his only chance to prove that his bat was usable.

All that mattered was that he had the chance.

Gently swinging his bat, Caleb stepped into the batter’s box and eyed the Oilers’ pitcher.

Caleb took his stance, and gently pushed the bat through the hitting zone with a few wide, slow sweeps.

As the pitcher went into his windup, Caleb’s grip on the magic bat tightened.

The pitcher delivered. It was hard and fast, and cut in toward Caleb’s belt.

He started to swing, but quickly stopped. The pitch almost hit him.

“Ball one!” the umpire called.

Caleb didn’t move. He stared back at the pitcher, thinking about what might come next. He expected another inside pitch, and he got one.

Caleb timed his swing perfectly, and met the ball well out in front of home plate. He pulled it hard.

The ball shot down the third-base line, forcing Coach Bergen to duck out of the way.

“Whew!” the coach called. “Straighten that out, and we’ll have a winner!”

The feeling of the ball cracking into his wood bat reminded Caleb how much he liked it.

By the time the next pitch was delivered, Caleb was smiling at the pitcher.

This time, the ball stayed over the middle of the plate.

Caleb didn’t hesitate. He drove his back leg forward, turned his hips perfectly, and met the ball dead center.



*Crack!*

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The ball sailed high out to left field.

The left fielder started to run back. Then he realized that he didn't have a chance of catching it.

As the ball landed on a hillside twenty feet beyond the fence, Caleb's teammates screamed and cheered.



## Chapter 3

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### TAMPERED WITH?

As he rounded second base, Caleb could see the crowd that was forming for him around home plate.

Two of his teammates had already run over the plate. Another was quickly rounding third base.

The rest of the teammates were gathered behind home plate. They were jumping up and down and screaming. The people in the stands watching were cheering too.

By the time Caleb's foot hit third base, he felt like he was flying.

He had done it. Caleb had just won the first game of the season for his team. Plus, he had also earned the right to keep using his magical wooden bat for the rest of the season.

He slapped Coach Bergen's hand as he rounded third and ran into the crowd around home plate. Caleb's teammates spread apart so he would have a clear path to touch the base.

Once he ran across the plate, his teammates surrounded him. Caleb was crushed between all of his teammates, hugging and high-fiving each other.

He couldn't remember feeling happier or prouder on a baseball field.

"All right, everybody," Coach Bergen called. "That's enough. Let the poor kid breathe. Everybody into the dugout."

Slowly, Caleb's teammates started to head to the dugout.

Caleb scrambled to his feet. He looked around for his bat, but it wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"Hey, who picked up my bat?" Caleb yelled to the dugout. There was no response.

"Seriously, guys," he yelled. "Quit kidding around. Where is it?"

No one said a word. Finally Coach Bergen said, "It's not in here, Caleb."

Then Caleb shot a glance over at the Oilers' dugout.

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The Oilers' coach, catcher, and pitcher were standing in front of the dugout. The home-plate umpire was standing with them.

That's when Caleb saw that the umpire was holding his bat. He appeared to be examining it.

Caleb jogged over to the other team's dugout. "Excuse me," he said. "Can I please have my bat back?"

The umpire didn't answer the question. "Young man, I'm going to need to talk to your coach," he said.

Caleb wasn't sure what was going on. He knew his bat was the legal size and weight. He and his father had checked the league rules before he signed up for the Spuds.

The Oilers' coach and players went into their dugout, leaving Caleb, his coach, and the umpire on the field. The umpire was still holding the bat.

"What's going on?" Coach Bergen said.

"There's an issue with the bat," the umpire said. "The other team pointed it out. Look here, on the end."

The umpire pointed to the top of the barrel of the bat.

The wood grain there was a slightly different color than the rest of the bat.

"See how it's discolored?" the umpire said. "It looks to me like this bat's been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" Caleb blurted out. He couldn't believe it. "You mean corked?"



~~“Look, son, I don’t know what you’ve done to it,” the umpire said.~~

Caleb couldn’t believe his ears.

That bat had been bought right from the Original Slugger factory, when his family went on a tour during summer vacation. The bat even had an authentication stamp on the label to prove it was real.

It was one of Caleb’s favorite things.

He knew for a fact that there was no way it was corked. Corking a bat made it lighter, and easier to swing. It was definitely against the rules.

Caleb hadn’t done that, and there was no way the factory would have sold a corked bat.

“I haven’t done anything to it,” Caleb said.

“Well, I can’t prove it, but it looks like someone has tampered with it,” the umpire said. “I can’t do anything about this game at this point, but I will tell you this: I wouldn’t use it in any more league games.”

The Oilers’ coach, Dr. Dennis, walked over. “I’m on the league’s board of directors, son,” he said. “If we find out that this bat has been tampered with, you’ll be suspended from the league. I wouldn’t use it again if I were you.”

Coach Bergen didn’t say anything as he and Caleb walked back to their team’s dugout.

Caleb felt terrible.

In a span of just a few minutes, he had gone from being the happiest baseball player in the world to one of the saddest.

“Coach, they’ve got to let me use that bat,” Caleb said. “There’s nothing wrong with it. I didn’t do anything to it.”

“I know,” the coach said. “But you heard the umpire.”

“But Coach,” Caleb pleaded, “the bat’s fine.”

Coach Bergen stopped walking. He hit Caleb in the eye and said, “Caleb, you’re using aluminum bats from now on. Period.”

## Chapter 4

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# CHEATER

The next night, the Spuds played another home game, this time against the Bucks.

Caleb brought his special bat to the game, but he left it in his equipment bag.

Before the game, Caleb looked for an aluminum bat that felt like his wooden one did. He must have tried six different bats before he found one that was close. But it wasn't the same.

That night, Caleb struggled at the plate. He made contact with the ball every time he was up, but he didn't get any hits.

The Spuds lost, 6–5.

“Don't worry, Caleb,” Coach Bergen said after the game. He could tell that Caleb was upset.

“I know you're a good hitter,” the coach went on. “It's just going to take some time to adjust to the metal bats.”

Caleb wasn't so sure. But over the course of the next few weeks, the aluminum bats did start to feel more comfortable.

Caleb started to get used to the feel of the aluminum bat. But he missed the satisfying weight of his magical wood bat. He also missed the way the wood bat felt in his hands.

The aluminum bat was slicker, and cold. Caleb hated it.

Caleb was not hitting the ball well. In fact, now he was one of the worst hitters on the team.

Coach Bergen dropped him lower and lower in the batting order, and finally started sitting him out of some games.

Finally, the Spuds were set for a rematch with the Oilers. Caleb couldn't wait.

Coach Bergen started him at first base, and batted him sixth in the order.

When Caleb stepped up to the plate for the first time, the Oilers' catcher was already there.

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“Hey, cheater,” the catcher said, smiling meanly at him.





Caleb couldn't believe what he was hearing.

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"Excuse me?" he said.

"You're not such a scary hitter without your cheating bat, are you," the catcher said with a smirk.

Now Caleb was angry. He felt the blood rush to his face. He tightened his grip around the handle of his aluminum bat.

"We'll see about that," he muttered.

The Oilers' pitcher wound up and delivered a hard fastball.

Caleb reared back and swung as hard as he could. He swung so hard that he actually let out a little grunt as the bat cut through the air.

He missed the ball by a mile.

Two more pitches came. Each time, Caleb swung hard. The last time, he swung so hard he fell over.

"Strike three!" the umpire bellowed.

The catcher laughed as he tossed the ball back to the pitcher. "Nice try, cheater," he said.



### CALEB'S DECISION

Caleb came up to bat twice more in the game. But he struck out both times, and both times he didn't look very good doing it.

The first time, he hit a wimpy little grounder that the first baseman scooped up. He stepped on the bag easily for the out.

The second time, Caleb hit a little pop up behind home plate.

The Oilers' catcher caught it without any trouble.

By the time the last inning came around, Caleb had seen enough. He wasn't going to sit back and listen to the taunts of the Oilers' catcher anymore.

When he was on deck, he saw that he had the chance once again to decide the outcome of the game. There was no way that Caleb was going to let an aluminum bat decide this game. Not when he had a perfectly good wood bat in the dugout.

So just before it was his turn to bat, Caleb knew he had to do something. He ran into the Spuds' dugout and grabbed his wooden bat.

"Caleb, what are you doing?" one of his teammates said.

"I'm trying to win the game," Caleb said. His jaw was clenched. "This is the only way to do it."

His teammates just stared at him.

Caleb squeezed his trusty bat in his left hand and marched out to the plate.

Coach Bergen saw the wooden bat in Caleb's hands, but he didn't stop him. "I hope you know what you're doing," the coach called to Caleb.

Caleb carefully set his back foot into the batter's box and got into his batting stance. He tried to ignore the noise he heard coming from both dugouts.

~~The catcher watched him intently.~~

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“I guess you decided to go back to cheating, huh?” he said, smirking at Caleb.

“Nope,” Caleb replied. “I’ve decided to win the game.”

The Spuds had a runner on third and two outs. They trailed the Oilers 7–6.

If Caleb got a hit, they could win.

Caleb dug in and stared the pitcher down.

A wide smile grew across his face.

Seeing the wood bat, the pitcher tried to throw inside pitches to Caleb. The first one nearly hit him. The second one missed the strike zone, too.

The pitcher wound up and delivered again.

*Zoom!*

The pitch sailed in. Caleb stepped into it and swung wildly.

Caleb was expecting to hear the crack of his bat, but instead, he heard the thud of the catcher’s mitt.

He had missed.

“Strike one!” the umpire called.

“Maybe cheating won’t help you this time,” the catcher said, laughing. He tossed the ball back to the pitcher.

Caleb stepped out of the batter’s box. He tried to calm himself down. He reminded himself that a good, solid swing beat an extra-hard swing every time.

Slow down, he thought. Swing easy. Let it happen.

The next pitch started in at Caleb’s elbow. Then it broke out over the plate.

Caleb stepped into it and swung.

This time, the swing was smooth and easy. Caleb heard the *crack!* he had been hoping for.

“Great hit!” Coach Bergen cried out.

The ball headed for the hillside beyond the left-field fence.

Caleb had done it again.





### CHECKING IT OUT

Caleb jumped and threw his arms up into the air as he began to round the bases.

Once again, his teammates were screaming for him.

The sad Oilers players walked slowly off the field.

The group of Spuds was waiting for Caleb as he rounded third base and headed for home.

But this time, Caleb's focus was on something else.

As he ran past third base, Caleb completely missed the high five from Coach Bergen.

Caleb wasn't paying attention. He was too busy watching the Oilers' catcher walk away from home plate, holding Caleb's special wooden bat.

He ran faster toward home plate.

By the time Caleb touched home plate, the catcher had handed the bat to the Oilers' coach, Dr. Dennis.

Caleb ran over to them. Coach Bergen was right behind him.

"What's going on here, Dr. Dennis?" Coach Bergen demanded. "That's our player's bat."

"As a member of the league's board of directors, I'm going to take this bat," Dr. Dennis said. "It's a league rule that if there are questions about a piece of equipment, the league can check it out."

"There's nothing wrong with my bat," Caleb said.

"The league will decide that," Dr. Dennis said. "If the bat turns out to be fine, it will be returned to you, and you can use it."

Caleb was worried. Once the Oilers had his bat, anything could happen to it.

He worried that the Oilers players would do something to it before the league checked it out.

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That would make him look bad.

Caleb tried to grab his bat, but Coach Bergen held him back.





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