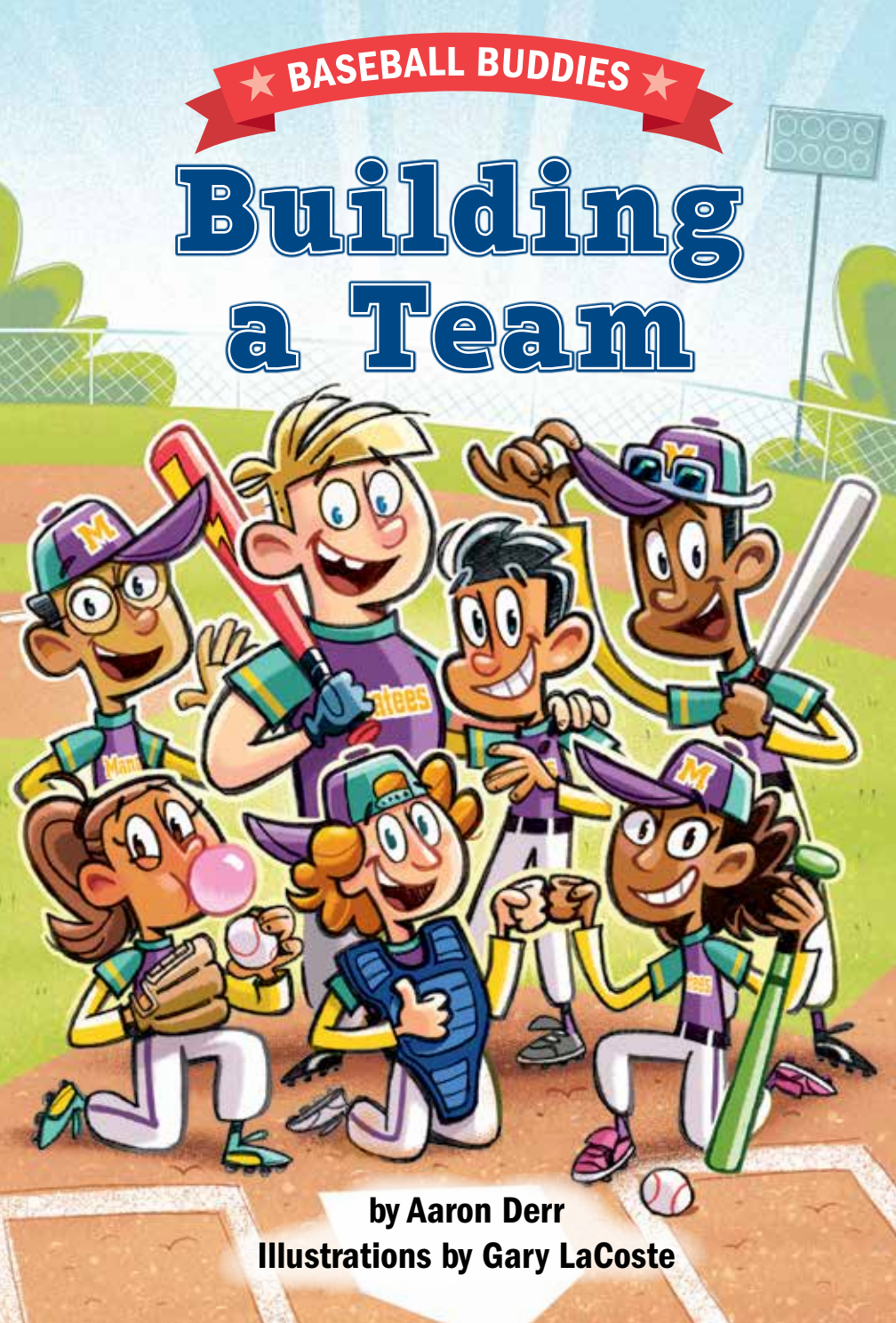
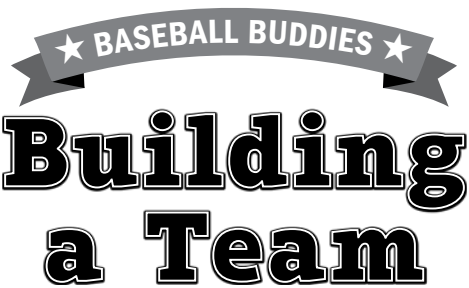
BASEBALL BUDDIES

Building a Team



by Aaron Derr

Illustrations by Gary LaCoste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Building
a Team

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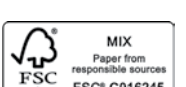

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For my kids,
who in one way or another
have inspired every one of my stories.
–Aaron

Here's the story...

From the moment he first laid eyes on him, Luis knew he wasn't going to like Jimmie. Luis was the new kid on the team, and it was the first day of baseball practice.

"Hey boys, everybody say 'hi' to Luis," said their coach. "He's a terrific baseball player, and I'm thrilled to have him on our team!"

"I don't think he said 'terrific,' " said Luis's friend. "I think he said 'average.' "

"Haha," said Luis. "I'm not going to tell the story if you keep interrupting."

"Fine."

"He's a terrific baseball player, and I'm thrilled to have him on our team!"

Luis stopped for a second and looked at his

friend.

Luis's friend shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "whatever."

Most of the players on Luis's new team were nice to him. Especially Gary.

"I like this part," Gary whispered to Aliyah.

But not Jimmie.

Luis and Jimmie could not have been more different. Luis was skinny but fast. Jimmie was strong but slow. Luis was shy and quiet. Jimmie was loud and obnoxious.

"Loud and obnoxious?!?" laughed Luis's friend.

"Well, you are!" said Luis.

Jimmie loved to hear Luis tell this story. Which was kind of weird, because it was a story about him. And it was about Luis, too. And Gary. And Aliyah and Roberto. And all their other teammates.

At the other end of the dugout, a handful of players started collecting their gear. The ones who took care to keep their stuff organized—batting gloves, fielding mitts and the most important

piece of gear of them all, bubble gum—were ready in no time. The rest were going to need just a few more minutes.

They were the McIntyre Manatees—named after one of the most unusual animals in the world. McIntyre was the name of the neighborhood where they all lived. Manatees are aquatic animals that are kind of weird and funny looking, but also smart and capable of learning from their mistakes.

Seriously. It was the perfect mascot for this team.

The time to go out to the field hadn't yet arrived, but it was getting close.

"Do you guys remember when Jimmie tried to teach Luis how to hit a home run?" said Gary. "And Jimmie was totally like…"

"HEY!" Jimmie yelled.

Everyone went quiet.

"Let Luis tell the story! He tells it best!"

No one dared speak. Even the players at the other end of the dugout stopped what they were doing. Everyone looked at Jimmie.

"Uhm, Jimmie?" Luis said softly. "We've talked about this."

Jimmie nodded his head.

"Right," he said. "Sorry. Sorry, Gary. Sorry, everybody!"

Jimmie leaned forward and apologized to the teammates on his left. Then he did the same to his teammates on the right.

Luis nodded.

Jimmie looked at Luis and took a deep breath, and when he spoke again, he was like a completely different kid.

"Hey guys," he said softly. "Do you think maybe we could let Luis tell the story? I just think he tells it best."

Luis looked at Gary, who could barely contain his laughter.

Aliyah didn't bother trying not to laugh. She just laughed out loud.

"Sure, Jimmie," Gary said. "Let's let Luis tell it."

"Thank you," said Jimmie, politely.

"You're welcome," said Gary, just as politely.

Everyone relaxed.

Some of the players began peeking their heads outside the dugout to get a good look at the sky. The rain was definitely starting to let up now. The worst of the storm clouds were moving away from them. Some specks of blue sky were already creeping through the few clouds that remained.

Some of Luis's teammates were now standing at the dugout's exit, waiting to be cleared to run onto the field. Others were still scrambling to find their missing batting gloves, or—more likely—that one last piece of bubble gum.

"If I'm going to tell the story, I have to tell the whole story, going back to our first practice," Luis said.

"Oh, brother," Jimmie said, rolling his eyes.

At their first practice, it was obvious that Luis and Jimmie were going to be trouble. The first time Luis bobbled a grounder, Jimmie said—with tremendous sarcasm—"Nice job."

And the first time Jimmie dropped a throw from Luis, Luis said, "Great catch."

"OK now you're exaggerating I don't think I—"

The kids who were still nearby all looked at Jimmie.

He looked back at them.

"Fine," he said softly.

"Hey!" said their coach. "The weather's looking better. Let's get loosened up!"

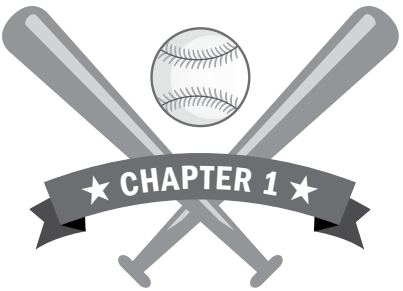
The players all looked at one another and smiled, then grabbed their gear and ran onto the

field.

They were good friends, and good teammates, too. Win or lose, they always had each other's backs.

But it wasn't always that way.

Luis!



If you're a baseball player, springtime is the best time. There's just no doubt about it.

Football players have autumn, with the changing leaves and cooling temperatures. Basketball and hockey players have winter, with their indoor games played in heated arenas.

But baseball? Baseball simply owns the spring. Yes, baseball season goes on throughout the summer. And if you make it to the Majors, you might be playing right up to the edge of fall.

But if you're 11 years old, and you play baseball, spring is where it's at. After a long winter away from the game, everyone is happy to be back. Everyone is excited. No one has even lost a game yet!

Yep, Luis thought. This is it. This is where I want to be. These are the best days of my—

"Luis! What are you doing over there? Why are you staring at the sky? We're having a team meeting over here! Do you want to be part of this team, or not?"

Luis shook himself awake from his daydream. After having moved from Texas to Ohio, Luis often thought about his old friends back in Texas. His new coach—Coach Joe was his name—was halfway across the field. The players were beginning to gather around Coach Joe for the meeting. Some had already taken a knee, ready to listen to whatever guidance their leader had to offer.

Luis had lost track of time and fallen behind.

"Right, coach! Sorry! Coming!"

Luis hustled over to join his teammates. Not a great start to his first practice with his new team, but that's OK. He'd have plenty of chances to show his new coach that he was willing to do whatever was asked of him.

"Here I am, the perfect follower," Luis thought. "Whatever you say, coach, I'll do it."

Luis was going to make the best out of this situation.

He missed his old team and his old coach. Coach Terry always told them exactly what to do.

"Stand over here."

"Hit the ball over there."

"Relax, you're too tense."

"Straighten up, you're too relaxed!"

But Coach Terry had to go and take a job in another city, and he took his two baseball-playing daughters with him. Everyone was kind of left on their own to find a new team—and a new coach. And then Luis's dad got a new job in Ohio.

And now, Luis had Coach Joe.

It was Luis's mom who found the Manatees, a community team of boys and girls from around the neighborhood. Weird mascot, but whatever. The mascot didn't matter. What mattered was how you played the game. Luis's mom says the other parents wouldn't stop talking about how much they love this coach. She knew some of them from school and others from the neighborhood, and she trusted their opinions.

OK, fine, thought Luis. I'll do my best. Keep a positive attitude. Work hard. Do whatever he says. Show him I can be a good follower. What else am I going to do, quit baseball?

That wasn't an option, of course.

Luis sat down on the outer edge of the circle of players. Most of them appeared to know each other already.

"OK everybody," said Coach Joe. "Welcome to another baseball season with the Manatees!"

Coach Joe paused as if he was expecting everyone to cheer or clap or something.

No one did, except one kid wearing catcher's gear, who clapped twice, said "yay!" kind of softly, looked around and realized no one else was doing it, then immediately stopped.

"OK," coach Joe continued. "Thank you, Gary, for clapping there. Seems like maybe last year's team would have applauded more. It's fine. You guys are just getting older, I guess. Too cool for that kind of stuff now. Good. Well… if you played for us last year, welcome back. We're glad to have you here. Again. With… us. The team.

"And if you're new, I'm Coach Joe."

Coach Joe waited again as if he was expecting someone to say something, like "Hi Coach Joe!" Or "Yay Coach Joe!" Or something.

No one said anything, except the kid in the

catcher's gear, who said, so faintly you could barely hear it, "Hi Coach Joe."

It seemed like it took forever for Coach Joe to figure out what he was going to say next. Some

of the players shifted from one knee to the other. Others just looked around nervously.

Was Coach Joe about to say something… important?

"OK. Yes. Well, it seems like this team might be a little bit different than last year's. Which is fine, because I want you guys to know I'm going to do things a little bit different than you might be used to. Everyone is a year older now, and it's time for the players—not the coach—to lead this team. When you were little, you needed a coach to tell you every single thing to do. Well, you aren't little anymore. Most of you, at least."

Coach Joe chuckled a bit and waited for someone to laugh.

No one did. Not even Gary the catcher.

"Wow. OK. Right. So, the first thing we're going to do, before we start practice, is name our team captain. Now, I'm here to tell you, anybody can be team captain. It doesn't matter if you were here last year, or if you're new this year. The future is wide open for all of you."

This seemed to get everyone's attention.

All the players who were slouched over before suddenly sat up straight.

"What does the team captain have to do?" asked a girl who was sitting right next to Coach Joe.

"Wow! Finally! Someone spoke up! This is great!" said Coach Joe.

"I actually said something two times," said Gary, but it was so quiet that Coach Joe didn't hear him.

"I'm glad you asked that question, Aliyah. So, listen. I'm still the coach. I'm going to set the practice schedule. I'm going to decide what kind of drills we do in practice. I'm going to set the lineup. Decide who pitches. All of that. But the team captain? Well, the team captain maybe has an even more important job than mine."

Coach Joe paused, waiting for someone to ask, "What job is that, Coach Joe?"

No one said anything.

Gary, the kid in the catcher's gear, looked like he really wanted to say something, but then thought better of it.

Coach Joe, clearly disappointed, shook his head.

"My gosh, what in the…" Coach Joe's voice trailed off. He put his hand on his forehead.

"OK, listen. So, that job is, making sure we practice the *right* way," he said. "Making sure we do our drills the *right* way. Making sure we have a good attitude. And being the person that your teammates can talk to if they have a problem. Maybe calling a players-only meeting, if they want to talk about things."

This is different, thought Luis.

"Isn't that *your* job, Coach?" said the biggest kid on the team, maybe the biggest kid Luis had seen in his whole life. I mean, this kid was so big, it seemed like there was no way he was the same age as the rest of the players. He was a different species almost.

"Another question! Wow! That's two in one meeting! This is going great!" said Coach Joe. "But seriously, I'm glad you asked that question, Jimmie. All the best teams in every sport have good team captains. A coach can only do so

much. When you get to a certain age, you need to have a leader who's also one of your teammates. Because whatever the message is, it means more coming from that person than it would from me."

Coach Joe paused to see if anyone else was going to ask a question.

No one did. But they were all paying attention. That's for sure. The ones who weren't really interested earlier? Well, they were interested now, absolutely. It seemed like maybe everyone thought being team captain would be pretty cool.

But Luis didn't think it'd be cool at all. He was a follower, not a leader.

"So, this is what we're going to do. We're going to go around our little circle here. Every player is going to introduce themselves. Everyone is going to tell us what they like about baseball. Then I'm going to tell you who's going to be our team captain."

Oh boy. This is *really* different, thought Luis. This just got real.

Luis wasn't particularly worried. Surely, he'd have a few minutes until it was his turn. He would

just listen to what the other kids said, then take something that sounded good and change it up just enough so that—

"Luis," said Coach Joe. "Since you were the last one here, you get to go first."

Oh great. This would never have happened if I had just paid attention, thought Luis.

Hi everybody.
=Snort=
fidget
KICK

When Luis joins his new baseball team, the Manatees, things seem pretty hopeless at first. Some of his new teammates—including "loud and obnoxious" home-run slugger Jimmie—are mean to him or to each other. His new coach doesn't tell the players everything to do like his old coach did. And some of the Manatees seem more interested in goofing off than in working hard.

Then Coach Joe makes Luis team captain. Will Luis rise to the challenge? Can he get the Manatees to balance working hard and having fun? Will he help his teammates learn to be friends rather than compete with each other?

Baseball Buddies **explores the power of working together, what it takes to build a team, and the lasting friendships that form on the baseball field.**

"As a baseball announcer, I get to see big leaguers up close every day at work. As a dad, I see my own little leaguers at home all year 'round. And I see a little of both when I think of Luis, Gary and the rest of the Manatees in Baseball Buddies. Whatever your level, it's a perfect tale of building a team, working hard, trying your best and—of course—having fun!"

—Scott Franzke, radio play-by-play voice of the Philadelphia Phillies

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