

THE ATHLETIC SNOB

by
SAM BARNES

Joe Ricardo couldn't believe that he—a poor kid—could be a snob.

Piggy Parker made me an All-American. That's what I'm going to tell them at the sports banquet tonight. Our town has never had a high-school All-American before, and everyone is pretty excited. But I might as well be honest. Piggy Parker made me all, All-American.

It wasn't planned that way. When I started high school I was a wrestler, and my big ambition was to win a state championship. That would have been enough to set this town on its ears, especially when it was me, Joe Ricardo—a kid from "across the tracks."

And I had really worked at being a wrestler, off the mat as well as on it. That's how I wound up at a sports camp the summer before my senior year—last summer, that is. And that's how Piggy Parker changed my life.

Sports camps aren't for guys like Joe Ricardo, but I began hearing about them as soon as I entered high school. The rich kids would go off in the summer and when they came back they were twice as good at whatever they were trying to play—basketball, tennis, swimming, or what have you. I finally got up nerve enough to ask my coach if they helped.

"Sure, Joe," he told me, "but they cost money. None of them are close around here. And don't you have to work this summer?"

"But would it make me a better wrestler?" I persisted.

"Sure."

"Then I'm going—somehow."
And it wasn't too tough. I work weekends at the bus station—as a

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general handyman. It's a job I got when I turned fourteen and got my work permit. Mom said I could hold out two dollars of each paycheck, and I started a bank account. By spring of my junior year I had enough.

Coach Griffith must have remembered, because every time he got a folder advertising some sports camp he passed it on to me. He wouldn't tell me which one was best. "They're all good, Joe," he said. "And they're all over the country. But I'd concentrate on the Poconos,¹ in Pennsylvania. There is one every ten miles there and it's not far to travel."

"But which one will make me a champion?" I had won the conference, the regional, but lost in the first round of the state tournament that season.

"Who knows?" the coach told me. "To be a champion, you have to have the luck of a champion." He looked at me closely. "But a real champion makes his own luck, Joe," he added.

So out of all those folders I picked a camp near East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, and one Sunday morning in July I set off, on my way to camp.

And that's how I got off on the wrong foot. I found out you don't take a bus to sports camps. Your folks bring you. And you show up early on Sunday afternoon to register and get assigned to a bed and squad. But I had trouble

because my bus developed engine problems, and we had to wait for another bus; I arrived late. As I walked up the short gravel path to the camp—a converted summer resort—it looked like everything I had dreamed it would be.

But I didn't get a very warm welcome. Supper was over, and the business office was closed. Luckily, the first man I ran into was Jock McKeown, the soccer coach—six-four, broad-chested, with a red windburned face from too many years on a wintry soccer field. He took me to the three great guys who own and operate the camp—Jack Jenson and Red Winton, who were college wrestling coaches, and Sam Carton, a former coach and now a high-school principal.

I didn't get anything to eat, but they took my money and assigned me to the senior wrestling group. Then Jenson, the housing boss, said the words that changed my life. "Put him in the room with Piggy Parker."

With only a week to get things done, sports camps get underway in a hurry. I went straight to the room, suited out, and reported to the wrestling pavilion—along with about thirty others my size and age. So I didn't meet Piggy until after the first practice. He was sitting on his bed in the dark, crying quietly.

There ought to be a law against parents who have a kid like Piggy Parker.

The Poconos are full of Piggy

1. *Poconos*. Pocono (pō'ke nō) Mountains in northeast Pennsylvania.

Parkers in the summer—kids whose folks have split, with neither of them wanting to take on the job of being a parent. So they send the kids to private schools in the winter, and to camps in the summer. If the kid is a teen-ager, he often gets dumped in a sports camp. “Dumped” is the right word, for few of them want to be athletes—and few of them are.

Piggy Parker had come in, one Sunday afternoon in June, spilling out of a big Cadillac with Pennsylvania license plates. His fat father unloaded a fatter billfold and bought Piggy six weeks at camp.

When Red recited the list of sports that camp offered, Mr. Parker picked wrestling. But that was just for the first week. Since then Piggy had tried track, gymnastics, and soccer. He was short, fat, awkward, and out of shape. But he was smart, from getting kicked around so much. But then, too, he cried a lot.

I guess that Sunday night Piggy had reached the end of the line. When he had reported to the soccer group, Mr. Mckeown had stationed him in the goal, where he had been peppered with penalty kicks. Now he threatened to run away from camp unless I helped him out.

So we started talking, and we talked most of the night—the rich kid from Philly who hated sports, and me, Joe Ricardo, from across the tracks in a Massachusetts mill town. I didn’t dig him and he didn’t dig me. But he convinced me I had to do something, and about

midnight I came up with this wild idea.

“Look,” I told him, “what if I switch to soccer and play alongside you?”

“I’d rather you played instead of me,” he mumbled.

“No way—but this could be the next best answer. I could help cover for you on every play.”

So next morning at breakfast we hit Jock Mckeown with our idea. At first he gave us a hard time. “You came here to wrestle, Ricardo—at least that’s what you said.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“We can’t have that—people changing sports after the squads are formed.”

But Piggy wore him down—the same as he had me—and at morning practice I found myself in a soccer goal with Piggy stationed ten yards in front of me playing center fullback.

Right off I found that everything I’d learned in wrestling helped in soccer. I just stood in that cage—on balance and crouched—as if I were going for a takedown. That helped me get in front of most of the balls headed my way. Then because I wasn’t afraid to “hit the mat,” I was soon diving for balls I couldn’t get in front of.

Mckeown never had to tell me a thing; it all came naturally. So in five minutes I was coaching Piggy. Mckeown had set the soccer class up in six separate teams. Some of them really were teams—complete squads that had

come together from their high schools with uniforms and a team bus. The best was Hilltop, a New York State school, but we had two others, Murray County and Camden Central. For the rest, McKeown spread the talent around as fairly as he could. All except our team. We were "Piggy's Packers," a pick-up gang of eleven campers from eleven different towns.

From the first Piggy and I were a two-man combination within the team. I kept him straight in front of me, calling out "Up—back—right—left" whenever I wanted to move him around. I tried to use him just to mess up the other team's plays and force a shot. Me—I plugged the goal.

I plugged it because I had to. Everyone was watching, which is a good reason for playing your best. McKeown watched me with a sour grin on his face. The rest of our team watched me, angry that I didn't help out on offense. And Piggy kept looking over his shoulder—like a kid watching his baby-sitter.

Now soccer—at that time—wasn't my game. That's the joke about me making All-American high-school goalie. I just hung in the net, playing touch defense and watching the other guys play offense. I didn't even know where to kick the ball, once I'd blocked a shot. I just figured that as long as nobody scored on me we couldn't lose.

And we didn't. All week long, three

times a day, when McKeown ended practice with a scrimmage game, we beat those other teams. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday were the big games. McKeown set up a full game schedule on those days, with the final champion getting some sort of prize after Saturday's championship. And we swept those playoffs—even against those Hilltop hotshots.

But even beating Hilltop in Saturday's final showdown wasn't any big deal to me. Because, while we were having the soccer playoffs, the wrestlers were having a takedown tournament. Those were the greatest times in the whole camp—eighty guys battling to see who was "king of the hill." I think I could have won it, because in the one wrestling session I got to nobody could handle me except Al Winter, the college boy. And because of that one session, Jack Jenson invited me to compete on Saturday.

But we were playing Hilltop—for the soccer championship and five gallons of ice cream. And most of all, Piggy Parker got that panic look in his eyes when he heard I might pass up the final game.

So we won, 1—0 and got the five gallons of ice cream. And I was a hero. And Piggy Parker had made it through one more week of sports camp. But it was all over for me. My seventy-five dollars was down the drain and I'd been on the wrestling mat just one hour.

After we had killed the five gallons of ice cream I walked back to the room to pack. Piggy trailed behind me like a lost puppy. Neither of us had anything to say. I was mad at myself for blowing my whole week of wrestling for a strange kid I'd never see again. I don't know what Piggy was thinking, but—for sure—we were splitting. He'd have to find another sucker for the next week.

I was slamming my gear into my zipper bag when Piggy spoke up. "I suppose you'll be a real soccer star this winter."

"Never happen," I grunted.

"Why not?"

"It's not my game—not here, not at home, not ever. At home it's for the country-club kids from across town—kids like those creeps from Hilltop High."

Piggy was quiet for a moment. Then he surprised me. "You're a snob, Ricardo. Do you know that?"

"Me! What have I got to be snobbish about?"

"Sports—and the way you play them," he said, his voice getting stronger all the time. "Things come easy for you—like my old man's money. So you look down on anyone who isn't good at sports."

You know—he was right. I thought about what Piggy had said that Saturday afternoon as the bus ride took me back home. And when school started two

weeks later I made a beeline for Coach Griffith, to tell him the whole story.

He didn't say anything when I finished; he's that way. But when I said I was going to try soccer that fall—before wrestling season—his eyes gleamed. Griffith is our soccer coach, too.

And that's the way it worked out. I tried out for the goalie position, and earned it easily, the same as at camp. But this time it was different. I was on a team—a part of it, not just a nursemaid for Piggy Parker. As I stood back there at the net and watched the patterns of play in front of me, I saw that I could be a part of the offense. So I worked on my drop-kicking—to set up plays. I learned to slap other guys on the back when we won.

And boy, did we win! We took the conference, our district, our regional, and went to the state finals before losing.

But that didn't matter to me, even though it was for something more than five gallons of ice cream. I didn't even keep track of my "saves"—not even when they kept telling me I was setting records. I didn't care about saves. I was trying to shake that tag Piggy Parker had hung on me. I was playing to get rid of the name "snob."

So I played goalie for all I was worth. And I guess that's a joke on me. Because a year ago my goal was to be a great

wrestler—all on my own. Now it was all changed.

And suddenly the season was over, and I was named an All-American. And the whole town was in an uproar. We're having a banquet tonight at the Legion Hall, and I get my certificate—the first

ever in any sport for our high school.

And I'll step up and accept it. But

I'm not sure that I deserve it. All-

American covers a whole lot of territory.

But I do know one thing. Piggy

Parker—wherever you are—I'm not a

snob any more.

Comment

1. a. Why does Joe Ricardo want to spend a week at a sports camp?
b. Why does he feel that sports camps aren't for kids like him?
2. a. Joe Ricardo says, "There ought to be a law against parents who have a kid like Piggy Parker." Is this a statement of fact or a statement of opinion?
b. What are some of the things that have happened to Piggy?
c. Why does Joe team up with him?
3. a. Why is Joe surprised when Piggy calls him a snob?
b. What are Piggy's reasons for labeling Joe a snob?
c. Do you think his comment makes sense? Why or why not?
4. How does Piggy Parker make Joe Ricardo an All-American?