

# S.O.R. LOSERS

WRITTEN BY AVI : ILLUSTRATED BY TIMOTHY BUSH

## Chapter One: The New Team at South Orange River Middle School

*a breakfast serials story*

"Where's Kelly?" Mr. Lester's face was pale. "How can we practice without Kelly? Doesn't anyone know where he is? It's two-thirty."

Mr. Lester was our history teacher. I thought he was going to cry. For myself, I felt like laughing, laughing hysterically.

There were eleven of us standing behind the South Orange River Middle School, near the playing field, feeling silly in brand-new red shorts and yellow T-shirts with "S.O.R." on our backs. If any dogcatchers had come around, they would have swooped us up for a bunch of stray mutts. On the field, kids were running, tossing, kicking, all that stuff.

During two practice sessions we had done two things. Since none of us knew soccer rules, Mr. Lester read them to us. Then we ran around in circles while he read the rules again, to himself. He didn't know them either. Second practice? We tried kicking the ball. Wasn't easy.

"Gentlemen," pleaded Mr. Lester. "We have our first game tomorrow. Doesn't anyone know something about Kelly?"

No one said a word. The truth was going to hurt and no one wanted to hurt Mr. Lester. He was a nice guy.

"We have to play tomorrow," he said, as if we didn't know. We knew it too well.

It was my special buddy, Saltz, who let it out. "Mr. Lester, Kelly no longer goes to our school. His father's job was transferred somewhere. Kelly tagged along." I don't think we'd had our new uniforms on for more than thirty

minutes, but Saltz, a natural slob, looked like he'd slept in his for twenty years. And he, like the rest of us, was only twelve.

"No longer in school?" said Mr. Lester, who had actually volunteered to be our coach. "But what about our first game?"

"He wanted to be with his family," said someone. I think it was Eliscue.

The coach sighed. He was a history teacher, and we were not what they write history about. If our school had a worse collection of athletes than the eleven of us, they were on display in the museum mummy section. But there we were Hays, Porter, Dorman, Lifsom, Saltz, Radosh, Root, Barish, Eliscue, Fenwick, and me, Sitrow. In a school that was famous, positively famous, for its teams and all-stars, we were not considered typical. Walk in the front door and the first thing you'd see was a wall of trophies—all for sports. It was as if we were a sports club. Not a school.

"Doesn't he understand you can't play soccer without a goaltender? He should have

told me." Mr. Lester said that the way he might explain the sinking of the Titanic.

"His father probably got the job because Kelly didn't want to play," said Dorman.

When Mr. Lester got red in the face from frustration, he looked like an overripe tomato. His round face puffed and the few bits of topside hair were like old, dead leaves. It was clear he already regretted being coach just as much as we regretted the thought of playing.



# S.O.R. LOSERS

WRITTEN BY AVI : ILLUSTRATED BY TIMOTHY BUSH

*a breakfast serials story*

For example, me. I was so bad I was designated as the only sub. I didn't expect to play at all. But then, none of us expected to play. The point was, our school had a requirement that you had to play at least one team sport each year. We had slipped through the first year. None of us had played. None of us wanted to. But once they caught on, they invented a team just for us.

"Let's go back to the locker room," suggested Mr. Lester.

Glad to skip practice, we followed him. Luckily, the locker room was empty. Everyone else was either playing or practicing.

I sat on a bench next to Saltz.

"Let's hear it for Kelly," he whispered.

"Maybe they'll call the whole thing off," I thought out loud.

He shrugged. Saltz and I had been pals since kindergarten. So I knew what he'd rather be doing: writing poetry.

"How many do we have here?" asked Mr. Lester.

"Two," said Root. He was our math genius.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Lester, "this is not a joke. Please line up."

Our cleats clicking like bad pennies on the cement floor, we went up against the wall, all eleven of us. Porter was on one side of me, Saltz on the other.

"Maybe we'll get shot," said Porter.

"Only if we're lucky," said Fenwick.

"Gentlemen, quiet please," said Mr. Lester. He stood there looking miserable. You could tell he didn't like what he saw. But then, considering what we saw in the future, starting the next day, we didn't like it either.

"Gentlemen," he said softly. When Mr. Lester shouted, his voice got softer. "Gentlemen, you know why you're here."

No one said a word. Seventh-grade boys don't make good farewell speeches, not in front of execution squads.

"Do you?" he asked. My guess is that he was wondering himself.

"It's good for us," Lifsom said, as if describing someone's need for a head transplant.

"South Orange River Middle School has a fine sports tradition," continued Mr. Lester. "Everybody plays, everybody wins." That's our motto. And you, gentlemen, have been here a full year without being on any team."

"That's because we've got better things to do," said Barish.

Mr. Lester's face turned purple. But he went on, even softer. You had to strain to hear. "That's exactly the point. You are all—each one—nice, smart boys. You, however, have avoided sports. Too much desk work."

"Nanotechnology," slipped in Hays. "The big future."

Mr. Lester's face made the ultimate transformation. He turned deathly white, and spoke as though from the grave. "S.O.R. believes in the whole person. We've created this team for your good. From now on, you're going to play. Sport is a major part of American life. Starting tomorrow, we've got a season to play. Six games. Let's do it with honor."

"What about ability?" asked Radosh.

Mr. Lester passed over that with a sigh. "We need a goaltender." I saw his eyes travel up and down the line. To my horror, they landed on me.

"Ed," he said to me, the way a kindly pirate might ask the next victim to walk the plank. "You're the tallest. You'll be goaltender."

"Me?" I said, pointing to my narrow, weak and unformed chest. I couldn't believe it.

"Yes, you."

"Sir," I said in a panic, "I never played goalie before. I never played soccer before. I never played anything before."

"Neither have your teammates. But we are going to give it our best, aren't we? We'll gain pride by trying. Game tomorrow. You all have permission to be out of your afternoon classes. Be ready, here, tomorrow at one-thirty for the bus. In uniform. We don't want to be late. It makes for a poor start."

And that's how I became goalie for the South Orange River Middle School Special Seventh-Grade Soccer Team. I happened to be tallest.

Talk about talent.

On second thought, I'd better not. Not when you see what happened.

To be continued...

Text copyright © 2012 Avi  
Illustrations copyright © 2012 Timothy Bush  
Reprinted by permission of Breakfast Serials, Inc.  
[www.breakfastserials.com](http://www.breakfastserials.com)