

The Day Big Frank Frowned

When Ben arrived at the pond, struggling through the drifts and whacking the snow out of the bushes with his new Titan, Mikey and Frank were already there.

Big Frank, tall even for thirteen, was charging down the rink, his snow shovel angled to clear away the layer of powder snow. He thudded into the far end, lifting the shovel to make a rounded bank. Mikey was hunched over, blowing on his fingers, and muttering over his skates.

“Neat! You got ‘em” Ben said as he grinned, jumping carefully onto the ice.

Yeah,' Mikey smiled,' but they're as stiff as anything. Can't ... get ...'em ... tight enough!

“Here, lemme try. Wow! C.C.M’s. Cool!”

Mikey leaned back to let Ben yank on the laces. He was two days younger than Ben, but a full head shorter. People who saw them together thought Ben was much older, but it wasn't really that way. Early on they had discovered that what one was good at, the other did poorly on. Like school. Mikey was a brain. Math and spelling came hard to Ben. Yet, when it came to sports, Ben led the way. Skating was easy for Ben. Mikey had trouble standing up. His ankles caved in and his legs wobbled. Often he couldn't stop and ended up in the snow banks or flopped on the ice.

“There you go,” Ben grunted, tugging on his mitts, “Now we just might make a skater outa you. Maybe you won't have to sharpen your ankles any more!”

“Oh yeah?” Mikey yelled, in make believe anger, “Watch this, smart guy!” He staggered off down the rink. Even in the firm new skates his ankles sagged. Turning in a clumsy arc he circled back. However, though Ben was grinning at his antics, he had to admit that his friend was getting better.

“Pretty good, eh smart guy?” Mikey yelled as he went past.

“Yeah MiKe!” Ben cried, “You're definitely getting better. Pretty soon you'll be as good as Frank's sister!”

He'd spoken too soon, however, because Mikey looked back at him, lost his balance and attempted to stop against the bank. He couldn't get sideways and slammed into the bank instead. Ben watched him fall into the deep snow on the other side. When he reached him, Mikey was flailing about in the snow, making angels.

“Mikey, Mikey, Mikey!” Ben scolded, imitating Mike's mother, “How many times I gotta tell you. You skate on de ice, not on de snow, ya crazy Uke!” He pulled his friend from the drift.

“Aw,” Mikey replied, “it was too fresh and clean looking anyways. I hate unmussy snow. Too tidy! Snow oughta have a lived-in look!”

“Uh-huh, sure! An' that's why you fell into it “

“Of course, I didn't fall into it. I jumped!” Mike replied primly. They both laughed at his excuse.

In the meantime, Frank had cleared off the ice. He skated over and pointed toward the cluster of houses where they all lived.

“Look who's comin'," he said, grinning. Frank always smiled. He rarely spoke, but he always smiled. Mikey and Ben didn't want to see the day Big Frank stopped smiling. He lifted weights in his basement and went haying on his uncle's farm in the summer. He was as muscular as a bull. If he ever got angry ... well.

Some of the guys were stumbling across the field with Bruce in the lead. They all carried sticks.

“Just in time," Frank said,' Rinks all cleared off.”

Secretly ‘Hot shot’ was what Frank called Bruce because he was the only kid on the crescent whose parents had enough money for him to play on a real hockey team. Bruce always complained about the rough ice ruining his skates. He thought he was better than the other guys because his parents had money.

“It's still awful rough, though. Jeez, I'm gonna wreck my new Supremes,” I Bruce complained, but then remembered his idea. “Hey, you guys interested in takin' on the Kids over at 'The Flats'? A guy on my hockey team says he'll organize them over there an' my dad says he'll drive us over.”

“Hey, yeah!”

“Great!”

“Sure!”

“Okay. My dad said we could fit in six guys an' equipment ...”

“I get centre!”

“Naw, you're always centre!”

“I get right wing!”

“Hey I wanna ...”

“Hold it,” Bruce yelled. “I’m organizing this, so I say who plays what. I'm centre. Frank’s on left defence, we need the big guy back there. Harv, you’re right wing. Davey’s in goal an' Ray on left wing. One a the squirts can be on the other defense.”

“Get Ben, he's better.”

“Yeah, Mikey can't skate!”

“Hey, that's not fair!”

“Yeah, he oughta get a chance.”

“How 'bout Mikey bein' a sub?”

“HOLD IT!” Bruce bellowed once more and said, “Six guys. Not six and a half. I didn't say nothin' about subs. Just six guys.” He stared around fiercely at them all. He was fourteen and bigger than all of them. “I'll tell you what. We have a little contest to decide which of 'em goes. First one to three goals wins. Make sense? We take the best player that way.”

Ben stood beside his friend feeling rotten. He couldn't do this to Mikey. He knew he'd win. He really wanted to play in the game, but he hated the idea of competing against his friend. "You go, Mike," he said.

"Naw," Mikey said glumly, "You're better and I'm no good at skating. You go."

"Aw, isn't that just the sweetest thing you ever heard?" Bruce sneered. "Look it, you wanna play on the team, you gotta beat the other guy. Right? Now, come on and lets get this over with sose we can practice!"

" Yeah, c'mon Ben!."

You can do it, MiKey!"

Ben's gonna beat 'im!" the others cheered like spectators watching two boxers. They cheered and taunted the two friends until they finally skated to the centre of the rink. Bruce followed them, flipping a puck nonchalantly.

Ben glanced over at Mikey but his friend wouldn't meet his eyes. A feeling of shame, of taking advantage of someone less able than himself welled up inside him. Ben turned toward the group of boys and looked at Frank. Frank wasn't smiling! He was glaring at Bruce.

That was when Ben decided. Playing on the team wasn't worth it. This was very wrong. He felt trapped and useless. What could he do?

"Here we go," Bruce said, ready to drop the puck.

Ben turned and skated away. "Hey, where ya,goinl? Whatsa matter, you chicken or somethin'?"

Ben reached the bank and stepped off the ice.

Bruce was right behind him.

“Did you guys see that? He could easily beat the squirt an' he skates away. You're yellow, Christian!” With that he pushed Ben down into the snow.

Though it was soft and didn't hurt, Ben felt alone and threatened. He scrambled to his feet, knowing Bruce would probably push him down again. Or worse.

“You leave him alone!” a voice cried.

Mikey! He had skated over and stood unsteadily between Bruce and his friend. He looked so tiny compared to the older boy.

“Oh sure! Look at this! First the squirts wanna fight it out, then the two of 'em wanna take me on ...”

“Three of 'em...” A quiet voice said. Frank wasn't smiling. Inside his mitts his hands were clenched into fists. “... and I don't think the three of us wanna be on 'your' team.”

“Right!” Mikey said.

“No way!” Ben agreed, feeling braver now.

“Awright, you guys can forget it then! I'm not organizin' this team!” Bruce growled, picking up his stick and starting towards home. “Besides, your dumb rink wrecks my skates!”

Frank's face creased into a chuckle, then a smile, and, finally, a laugh. He called after Bruce. “Hey Hotshot, next time you play with us we're gonna wait 'til you shovel off the rink!”

Bruce took off his hockey glove and held up his middle finger without looking back.

Later, when the other guys were over their disappointment, they organized a game. Mikey had never skated better and even scored a goal.

“See, smart guy!, he yelled at Ben, “I prob'ly coulda beat you!”

Ben smiled as he watched big Frank lift his little brother by the collar and

carry him squirming and protesting to the nearest snowbank. "I was only jokin' Frank!" MiKe shouted, "Help me, Ben!"

"I'm not helpin' you," Ben laughed as Frank dropped his brother into the snow. "After all, I hate to see all that tidy, 'unmussy snow'! What it needs is a few of your angels, Mike!"