

OFF THE CROSSBAR

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Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney
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Private Bag 94407, Botany, Manukau 2163, New Zealand

Scholastic Children's Books

Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1DB, UK

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Skuy, David, 1963-

Off the crossbar / David Skuy.

(Game time)

ISBN 978-0-545-98624-3

I. Title. II. Series: Game time.

PS8637.K88O33 2009

jC813'.6

C2009-901168-9

ISBN-10 0-545-98624-9

Front cover image © Radius Images/Firstlight

Back cover image © iStockphoto.com/Sparkia

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6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada

09 10 11 12 13

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*To Jim York,
the ultimate hockey dad, coach, and fan.*

1

PICKUP PAIN

Charlie Joyce cut across the top of the circle in his own end, looking for a breakout pass. The defenceman ignored him completely and carried the puck around the net and up along the right boards.

“Last goal wins,” the defenceman called out, snapping a pass to a player wearing a Montreal Canadiens sweater.

His teammate took the pass, deftly sidestepped a forechecker, and then moved towards centre, cradling the puck with his stick. He sped up as he crossed the red line, hesitated a second, then when he got close to the blue line, jumped up into the air to split the defence. The defenders were not fooled, however. The right defenceman shifted across and stripped him of the puck. His partner corralled the spinning disk and swung it across ice to a player waiting at the red line against the boards.

Charlie had stopped skating at his own blue line. He

bent over and rested his stick on his shin pads. He wasn't tired, even though this was his first time on the ice in months. He'd barely touched the puck the entire game. No one would pass to him — typical new-guy treatment. He glanced up at the clock. The pickup game would be over in a minute, and then he could go home.

The player with the puck dumped it deep into Charlie's end. A defenceman beat everyone to the puck, and he fired it around the boards just ahead of a forechecker. The puck skipped over the stick of another player, and it skidded to Charlie. He was about to back-hand it down the ice, when his frustration boiled over, and he decided to try a rush on his own. At the least they'll see I can skate with the puck, he figured.

Charlie pushed off across his own blue line to gain momentum, swerved around another player who poked at the puck, and headed back to his own net. The defenceman called for the puck, and his goalie told him he was going the wrong way, but Charlie gave them no mind. He raced around his net, cut sharply to his left to evade a forechecker, squared his shoulders and headed up the ice.

His quick move surprised the other team. All three opposing forwards were caught off guard and left behind. His teammates rushed up to offer support, all calling for a pass by banging their sticks on the ice. On his right was the kid with the Canadiens sweater. On his left was a thin, lanky player who had scored three goals and was eager to add to his total. The defenceman, trailing slightly behind, kept demanding a drop pass. Charlie

picked up speed, determined to keep the puck to himself. The wind raced against his face, the sound of his skates cutting deeply into the ice spurring him on. Now he was having fun. He felt his heart pounding, not from the effort, but from the excitement of the upcoming challenge.

Two defencemen were waiting at the red line for him. Charlie sized them up and decided to take on the one to his right. For a moment he stood his ground, ready to step up and force Charlie to the outside. When he realized how fast Charlie was moving, he turned and raced frantically towards his own net. Charlie shoved the puck into his skates, so that when he spun around to skate backwards, Charlie was able to slip inside and pick up the puck. The defenceman threw out his right hip in a last-ditch effort, but all he caught was air. The other defenceman slashed at Charlie's skates gamely, but he was also too late. Charlie was past them both and in alone on a breakaway. Charlie had been impressed by this goalie. Quick on his feet, and an awesome glove hand, he wouldn't fall for just any move. Charlie carried the puck to the hash marks, moving right and holding the puck on his backhand. The goalie drifted into his net anticipating a deke. Charlie immediately cut across, transferring the puck to his forehand, and drove for the far post. The goalie moved with him, dropping into a butterfly, stretching his right pad out to block the corner. He leaned forward, holding his glove almost straight out, as if certain that Charlie was in too close to do anything but shoot the puck down low.

Underestimating him, as they all had.

At the last second, Charlie whirled to his backhand, dropped his bottom hand down the shaft of his stick, and flicked the puck straight up in the air. The goalie managed to wave his glove at the shot, but Charlie had fooled him. The puck sailed over his shoulder, just under the crossbar, and into the net.

It was a spectacular goal, but Charlie didn't dare do more than circle to his end. He didn't even raise his stick. No need to show off when it was his first time playing with these guys. Some of the players on his side took the opportunity to rub it in, and they rapped the boards with their sticks in triumph. The buzzer sounded, and the doors opened for the Zamboni.

"Time's up," the driver bellowed gruffly.

Charlie coasted towards the open door at the far end, his head down, breathing heavily. Even though it was only a pickup game, a goal always felt good — especially the winner — and his earlier feeling of frustration was forgotten. He turned and skated backwards, looking to see if there was a puck lying around so he could take a few shots before the Zamboni came on. Out of nowhere someone slapped his skates from behind.

Charlie fell heavily to the ice, his shoulders and helmet hitting first. It took a few moments to regain his senses. When he got to his feet, the player was skating away. He looked back at Charlie and waved. A few players, huddled at the door, laughed as they left the ice.

Charlie stared at them, not sure what to do.

“Hey, kid! Off the ice!” the Zamboni driver ordered.

Charlie kept looking at the other players. The slew-foot was too much to take. He’d put up with their not passing to him — almost expected it. They didn’t know him. But why bully him? What did he do to deserve that? He was almost going to do something about it, but changed his mind just as quickly. He didn’t have a friend at the game — and the guy that tripped him knew everyone. He couldn’t take on twenty guys. He’d only make a fool of himself by fighting.

“Get out of the way!” the Zamboni driver shouted.

Charlie had forgotten about him. He pushed off a few feet to let the driver slide past, then smashed his stick against the boards, and skated off.

A few of the other kids were already in their street clothes when Charlie walked into the dressing room. He was relieved that the player who tripped him and his friends were in another room. No one took any notice, and that suited him fine. He sat down in front of his bag and began to untie his skates. His mother had forced him to come out today. “It’ll be fun,” she’d told him, “and a great chance to make some new friends.” He looked up briefly, then back to his laces. No chance making friends with this bunch.

Besides, it was totally random that he was here in the first place. He should be back home, playing with his old hockey team, with all his buddies. Everything felt wrong here — even hockey was messed. Charlie pulled off his skates and tossed them roughly into his

bag. He didn't bother wiping the blades. He took off his jersey and the rest of his equipment and stuffed them into his bag with equal force. He never used to have to hurry, not when his dad picked him up. Hockey had always been their thing. He'd taught him to skate, to stickhandle, the rules — his dad had taken him to practically every game he'd played.

Charlie felt a lump rise in his throat. He fought back a tear, leaning forward as he finished tying his shoes so no one could see his face.

Why did it have to happen? How many dads get killed crossing a street just going to get a coffee? He'd never forget being called out of math class. The principal told him that a car had run a red light and hit his father.

“Hey, are you Charlie Joyce?”

Charlie was startled by the question, and he jerked his head up. He hoped his eyes weren't red. A stocky kid, almost fat, waved at him from the door. He was in his stocking feet, wearing only his hockey pants and shin pads. Charlie remembered him playing defence the whole game.

“Your mom's outside saying for you to hurry up,” he said, pausing for a moment before adding, “and that was a nice move at the end.” He smiled shyly, then turned abruptly and left for the other dressing room.

Charlie zipped up his bag, grabbed his sticks, and ran out to the lobby. Now he felt guilty about taking so long. He braced himself for a mini-lecture, but his mom surprised him with a big smile. She ran her fingers

through his thick, curly brown hair, and kissed him on the forehead. Next to her, Danielle snacked on a bag of chips and slurped a Pepsi Twist.

“How was the game, honey?” his mother asked.

“Okay.” He shrugged. “It was mostly boring.”

“Did ya win?” Danielle inquired.

“It was just a pickup game. No one keeps score.”

The three of them made their way to the parking lot. He would have liked to get something to drink, but didn't want to slow his mom down. She was always in a rush lately, he reflected. At first he'd been excited by the idea of moving to Terrence Falls and opening a café. His mother was a professional cook, and had always dreamed of owning her own place. His grandparents also lived here, and he was close to them. Still, it was tough to leave the town he'd lived in his whole life. He had lots of friends and had known most of them since grade one. And all of his crew was going to the same high school. He'd been captain of his hockey team, starting forward on the school basketball team . . .

He stopped thinking about that. It only made him feel worse. Besides, they'd only been in Terrence Falls for three weeks — of course it was going to take time to get used to everything.

His mom opened the car doors, and he and Danielle piled into the back seat. For a few minutes it was quiet. Charlie was in no mood to talk. Finally, his mom broke the silence.

“So is everyone excited about the first day of school tomorrow?” she asked cheerfully.

Charlie grunted and stared out the window. Danielle murmured a barely audible “sort of.”

She laughed, and said, “Well that’s not the most enthusiastic response I’ve ever heard. How about, ‘Yeah, Mom, it’s going to be a lot of fun’.”

“Yeah, Mom, it’ll be loads of fun,” Charlie replied sarcastically.

She sighed and turned off the radio. “Listen guys,” she said. “I realize how difficult this has been for you. It’s been hard on me too. It’s never easy to start at a new school. But I still think this was the right thing to do. Without your father I need to make more money and have flexible hours so I can take care of you guys, and I thought it would be good to be near Grandma and Grandpa. We’ve been through so many changes lately, but I promise that this is it. I need you guys to help me a bit, though. Okay? If you could just help me by being open-minded, and give this place a chance. That would make a big difference. Could you do that?” She ended on this hopeful note, and glanced up at the rear-view mirror to see how her pep talk had been received.

Danielle caught her eye and gave a weak smile. Charlie continued to look out the window, pretending he hadn’t heard. The way the game ended made it hard for him to feel good about anything, let alone the fact that tomorrow he had to go to the first day of grade nine without knowing a single person. His mom turned on the radio. Five minutes later, the car pulled into the driveway of a large, two-storey red-brick house.

“Home sweet home,” she said.

Charlie jumped out and headed to the front door.

“Could you please get your hockey bag?” his mother asked.

He stomped back down the steps, and snatched his bag and sticks out of the trunk. His mother ignored him and opened the front door.

“Could you close the trunk, Charlie!” she said forcefully.

Charlie dropped his bag on the ground, spun around, and slammed the trunk closed as hard as he could. His mother and sister went inside. Charlie carried his stuff to the garage. He was embarrassed by how he’d just behaved, but he couldn’t help it. Sometimes he let things get to him too much. Hockey had always been his release. Charlie shook his head. Maybe he’d have to say goodbye to hockey as well.

His mom stuck her head out the front door.

“Charlie, sorry for rushing you, but we need to eat. I have to meet the installers of the new oven.”

“Okay, Mom,” he replied.

He tossed his bag onto a shelf in the garage and leaned his sticks against the wall, pausing to take a deep breath to calm the butterflies in his stomach. He got that feeling a lot lately. All of a sudden he’d just get nervous. He thought about the pickup game. Maybe it was a mistake to draw attention to himself by scoring that goal. He should have just passed the puck. Then he never would have been tripped like that. Tomorrow at school he was gonna keep quiet. The other kids would

ignore him. The key thing was to get through the day.

Having a plan made him feel better. He closed the garage door and bounded up the stairs to the house.