

Chapter 1

A Boy and a Ball

“Rebound comes to the cat-quick, high-leaping Rudo.... He passes off to Ashby.... Ashby dribbling downcourt runs into the opposing team. He stops and drills a bounce pass in to Number 44 at the free throw line.... The ‘Reckless Russian’ pivots. He shovels the ball up and in between the stretching arms of three defenders - a FANTASTIC move by Rudo, one of his unbelieveables. That puts the blazing Trojans six points out in front - “

Out on the boards, sweat soaking his cardinal-and-gold uniform emblazoned with the big “44,” John Rudometkin, the “Reckless Russian” who had just drawn the accolades of the Trojan sportscaster, turns back with his four mates to meet the next Stanford defense. Fourteen thousand fans roared as the University of Southern California team raced back upcourt in the huge new Los Angeles Sports Arena.

By the final gun the Trojans had wrapped up their league championship, and John Rudometkin had come from behind to win the scoring crown for the second consecutive year with a brilliant 33-point performance. That year Rudo had captured twenty of the twenty-eight then-existing records at USC and was named to many All-American basketball teams. In addition he was voted most valuable player on his team for the third consecutive year - a first in USC history - and was awarded the diamond “Athlete of the Year” award, USC’s top athletic honor.

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The adulation of the crowds, the superlatives of the sportswriters, and the offers by professional basketball teams - it all seemed something like a dream to John, even though the praise had been building for months. But it was real enough, he knew that. It was just so different somehow from the days when he was shooting baskets behind the house in Santa Maria, California.

John, age 10, had come home from school that afternoon in October, 1950, and there on the dining room table was the new ball. Grabbing it up, he bubbled out his thanks to his smiling mother.

“I knew you would like it, Johnny,” she beamed. “You always talk about the games. They seem like a waste of time, but I guess you enjoy them. So I looked at the redemption stamps we have been saving. In the catalog it showed the ball - well, I just decided maybe you and your brother Mike would have fun with it.”

Fun with it? Of course he would, all the fun in the world. Out of the house he bolted with Mike and his sister Julia. They piled into their father’s old truck and rumbled a couple of miles out into the country to a stand of eucalyptus trees. There they searched out a tall straight one, knocked it to the ground, and stripped off the branches. They brought it back to a vacant lot behind the house and dug the hole. Then they hammered some old two-by-sixes together on the pole, mounted a hoop on the crude backboard, and, with the help of neighbor kids, swung the contraption into the air.

“Doesn’t it look great,” John enthused, grabbing the ball and arcing it toward the hoop. “It’s just great, that’s what!”

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As the kids raced around the lot with the ball, shooting wildly at their creation, young John thought about the ball. His parents, he knew, couldn't tell a basketball from a baseball - all sports were a waste of time, his dad had said time after time. The words flew thick and fast when he felt the boys were emphasizing play more than work.

That all came natural to his folks, John reasoned. They'd had a hard life. Not until five years ago had they been able to afford the little two-bedroom home in Santa Maria. Before that things had been hard all the time; his mom had told him so.

John's grandparents had been born in a little village in southwest Russia. Their entire life centered around the Molokan religion. But with the 1900's came the Communism ideology that clashed sharply with their deeply religious ways. So in 1904 the family sold their small farm to escape from the persecution. They could not compromise, but they could seek a more tolerant land. With money from the sale of the farm they booked passage from Russia to New York-gateway to the land of tolerance and religious freedom-America. From New York they went overland to Los Angeles.

Life was not easy for the newly arrived Russian farmer folk in Los Angeles. They were "foreigners" whose strict religious ways set them in sharp contrast to the Angelenos. After two years John's grandparents, along with their firstborn son - John's father - decided to go to Mexico. They had heard there was land to be had near Ensenada on which they could again take their old country ways. Soon after they had settled, other Russians began to arrive in the little village named Guadalupe. Within months the strict disciplines of the Molokan faith had been transplanted to Mexico.

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The parents of John's mother had left Russia two years after his father's parents. Molokans too, they were not wealthy, and money from the sale of their possessions would not stretch all the way to America by way of South America's Cape Horn, the route of their ship. When the vessel reached the southern tip of the Western Hemisphere, the family was put ashore for lack of funds.

The family started walking from the southern tip of South America all the way to the United States!

Different jobs along the way kept them from starving. Arriving in Panama during the building of the famous canal, they worked long enough to save for the remainder of their long trek. While tracking through Mexico they heard of a small colony of Russians settling in a little town called Guadalupe. Hoping that these countrymen were in Mexico for the same reason they were going to America, the family changed their plans and headed to Guadalupe. There they found many friends and relatives prospering from their skillful use of the fertile Mexican land. In Guadalupe, in 1912, John's mother was born, one of a family of nine.

With skill born of many years' experience, the families in the little Russian colony in Mexico made the land prosper. Clannish, they held to their strict religious ways, gave agricultural advice to their Mexican neighbors, who in turn treated them kindly. Soon the boy and girl who were to become John's parents met, courted, and married in Ensenada. They worked the land provided by their parents; then John's brother and sister were born. The Rudometkin home was closely patterned after the homes from which the young couple had come - the old traditions, the old religion were most important.

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Then the prosperous days and the friendly relationships with the Mexicans began to fade. Squatters, convinced that the land should be theirs, moved in. Crop failures came one upon another. John's father changed his work in order to keep his family together. As a mechanic working in Ensenada he talked with tourists passing through and heard them tell of opportunities to the north in California.

"I have decided we will go into the United States," he announced to his little family one day after work. "There is more work in California, more opportunity to prosper there, everyone tells me at the shop."

So with a few possessions and savings of two hundred dollars the family prepared to move. They had no automobile, so John's grandfather drove them across the border into California one bright day in 1939. They had trouble with the new language - they spoke Russian and Spanish very well, but little English - but soon they arrived in Shafter, California, where John's father started working on a relative's farm.

Soon dissatisfied with his new job, Mr. Rudometkin decided to leave Shafter for the California coastal area where the weather would be more like his former home in Mexico. He purchased a used truck for one hundred dollars, and with his wife, two children, and forty dollars in savings moved to the coastal village of Santa Maria, midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

With the move to Santa Maria, life looked better for the Rudometkin family. The land yielded good crops, and soon John's father was able to work a small farm of his own.

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On June 6, 1940, the third child of the family - John Rudometkin IV - arrived, first of the children to be born in the luxury of a hospital. Although still poor by almost every standard, the Rudometkins felt they could finally afford the twenty-four dollars the County Hospital in Santa Maria required to cradle the first hours of John's life on earth. They would pay the bill, Mr. Rudometkin promised, in five-dollar installments.

With the arrival of the new infant things seemed to go even better with the Rudometkins. Money from the flourishing crops they used for little conveniences to make work around home and farm go easier - the Rudometkins were becoming Americanized. When John was five, his parents felt they should be closer to thriving Santa Maria, so with their hard-won savings they bought a modest, two-bedroom home on the edge of the town.

From the first day of grade school, John's interest in athletics began to sprout; and, to the dismay of his parents, the youngster spent more and more of his time with the neighborhood kids, who seemed unusually skilled at baseball, basketball, and football.

The Rudometkins' heritage told them that these "sports," as John called them, were only play and, therefore, to be discouraged - tolerated only when absolutely necessary. Partially Americanized, the Rudometkins still held to the ways and rites of their parents' Molokan religion, and to the proposition that only hard work, in large doses, could hold a home together. Everything they had, the Rudometkins told the children, came because they worked for it, sometimes from before dawn until

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long after dark. Playing at “sports” all the time was certainly no way to learn how to work and to prosper.

Yet the old-country parents could see that times were changing. Children everywhere seemed to have more freedom to play; and so, along with their neighbors, the Rudometkins gave in to John’s continual requests, “May I go out to play-just for a little while?”

Finally, recognizing that the boy was really trying to develop his skill in sports, his parents began to show a flicker of interest. So had come the impulse by John’s mother, when the boy was ten, to purchase the basketball with redemption stamps.