

Ralph Twigger, Bully Buster

Ralph, Josh and Jeremy. Jeremy, Ralph and Josh. Josh, Jeremy and Ralph. No matter how you put it together—those three were inseparable... before school, after school and now in school? Ralph was now employed at the boys' school—as the playground lunch and recess supervisor at Lincoln Elementary School.

“Yea! Ralph’s taking Mrs. Snipes’ place.”

Mrs. Snipes had a reputation out there on the playground. She took the role of playground supervisor very seriously. You couldn’t run, you couldn’t cut in line, you couldn’t mess around over at the drinking fountains, you couldn’t make up games, chase the girls, spit if you really needed to and the kids were sure she was part of some underground conspiracy to end recesses across America! It was awful. It wasn’t Lincoln Elementary. It was Snipes Elementary.

“Well, boys, I hope you won’t be embarrassed with me out there on the playground tomorrow,” said Ralph as he made the boys a snack of peanut butter and Ritz crackers.

“Are you kidding, Ralph?” said Josh.

“You are the answer to our prayers,” added Jeremy.

“Mrs. Snipes has been torturing us long enough,” Josh told the kids who gathered around him after school, only moments after the announcement had been made. “It’s kids rule on the playground again. We’re taking back what’s ours. We’re free.” It was a little speech but it was empowering to the kids at Lincoln Elementary.

“And you boys are really okay with this?” Ralph inquired once more.

Josh licked peanut butter off his fingers, “Are you kidding? We are finally free of the tyranny of Snipes’ displaced anger.”

“Her what?!”

“Her displaced anger—that’s what mom calls it,” added Jeremy.

“I think your mom’s been reading her psychology books a little too much. Mrs. Snipes is a woman who takes her job very seriously. Her job is to keep you safe out there on the playground.”

Josh and Jeremy looked at each other between bites of Ritz cracker sandwiches. “Uh-oh.” *Maybe this wasn’t such a good thing—Ralph taking over as playground supervisor. What if Ralph was like Mrs. Snipes?*

They thought about the way Ralph handled kids during church services when he ushered, how he used to treat Todd when he was a rebellious teenager. How Ralph made them tow the line every day. The memories came sweeping back and with them a sudden feeling of dread.

The next day Ralph reported for playground supervisor. He was introduced at the morning assembly and made a rousing short speech.

“Thanks for the warm welcome to Lincoln Elementary. Let’s have fun out there today on the playground.” Spontaneous thunderous applause burst forth in the room.

Ralph continued, “But let’s use our brains out there. Safety first, fun second. See you after lunch.”

That didn’t sound too bad. Although, to Josh and Jeremy, it felt like the whole school stared at them on that last line—safety first, fun second. Including the school’s biggest

bully, Roger Ross, who sat next to Josh during assemblies on account of the fact that their last names were the same.

“What’s he talking about Ross?” asked Roger with arms folded over his chest.

“What?”

“Safety first, fun second? You said, ‘it’s kids rule on the playground again’ yesterday. You’d better be right about what you said?”

Josh felt this heat rise from his toes to his face, accompanied by a queasy feeling. You did not want Roger Ross as an enemy.

Mrs. Snipes was then given an award for service to Lincoln Elementary.

“I want to thank the children of Lincoln Elementary for twelve wonderful years. I want to wish Mr. Twigger good luck and I’d like to pass on my copy of The American Safety and Playground Regulations Handbook written in 1957, which I have followed to the letter of the law for past twelve years.”

Then Mrs. Snipes took out her whistle and sounded the all too familiar deafening blasts:

2 short blasts on the whistle—first and last warning

1 long followed by 2 shorts—violation—report to Mrs. Snipes

2 long—go directly to the office—you’re dead—your parents will be called shortly!

Ralph was called to the platform and Snipes gave a final ceremonial charge to Twigger. She handed him the small red handbook and then Mrs. Snipes placed a brand new regulation Thunderblast stainless steel whistle complete with red chord around Ralph’s neck.

“May this handbook and your safety whistle preserve life on the Lincoln Elementary School playground.”

It was over. The whistle had been blown for the last time. The legend had ended.

“That concludes our assembly today,” said Mrs. Johnson, the principal. “Have a great day.”

Kids walked back to their classrooms with lightness in their steps—an air of expectancy. A new day had just dawned at Lincoln Elementary. Just like Lincoln freed the slaves, so had they been freed at Lincoln Elementary. Recess could be what every kid longed for once again. Dodgeball was back!

Well, the first recess with Ralph went pretty well. He was totally occupied with a bunch of the nerdy kids. They were hanging around Ralph for safety—Snipes was gone and possibly a watchful eye over Roger Ross.

A few kids pushed the envelope by coming to tattle on someone who threw something at someone. Ralph never cared much for tattle-tales. “Run along now and find something to do with all that energy.”

“But Mr. Twigger...”

Suddenly, two dodgeballs shot past Ralph’s head.

Mrs. Snipes had ‘outlawed’ the game years ago. Thankfully, Ralph had quick reactions and great peripheral vision for his age. He didn’t take down any names but these dodgeballs all seemed to originate from sixth graders.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Johnson, “They’re all sixth graders.”

“Now, this Roger Ross, he’s a sixth grader too, right?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Well, that’s mighty interesting, isn’t it?”

“Roger is what some would term a ‘difficult child.’ Roger Ross is down to, shall we say, his last chance at Lincoln Elementary.

“So he’s a bully?”

“We don’t like to use the word ‘bully’ anymore. Roger is verbal, quite smart. He uses that to his advantage. He’s given to outbursts. Picks on those weaker and smaller, but he’s big for his age.”

“We called ‘em ‘bullies’ back in my day.”

“Well, we’ve tried everything with Roger. We’re all just crossing our fingers until June that there will not be another ‘incident’.”

“What? Another incident?”

“Mr. Twigger, I think it’s to your advantage not to have any further knowledge of Roger’s background. Treat him like you would any other kid. Just keep your back covered.”

“On the playground, at recess? Do you have any idea how hard those sixth graders can hurl a dodgeball? We’re not talking about poking an eye out, we’re talking about lobbing off a head.”

“If you feel it’s unsafe, we can shut down the game. Mrs. Snipes never let the children play dodgeball.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m kind of trying something new. No injuries today.”

“That’s great. I hope it works, Mr. Twigger.”

Ralph couldn't get Roger off his mind that afternoon. When he went to pick up the boys after school, Roger was standing by the fence hurling insults (like dodgeballs) as kids walked or ran quickly past him.

“Hey, Rachel, where'd you get those shoes—Goodwill? Hey, McMichaels, you owe me a snowcone tomorrow or you die. Jenn, midgets aren't allowed in school—try the circus.”

Roger seemed to know every kid that walked by and his insults were creative though cruel. Ralph allowed two more to go—“Hey Martinez, what's with the briefcase—are you a doctor? John, don't forget the deal we made yesterday at lunch.”

Ralph snuck up behind Roger. “Hey, Ross, are you working for the school or what?”

He whipped around and fortunately Ralph was taller than Roger. “What?”

“You sure seem to know everyone here at this school,” Ralph said in low knowing tone.

“What?”

“You seem to know everyone!”

Roger didn't know what to make of this. Was this a compliment, a question, a conversation? Was he in trouble and why was the playground supervisor, Mr. Twigger, here? Lunch was over hours ago. Roger pulled up some bravado.

“Yea?”

“Want a job?”

“What?”

“A job.”

“What?”

“Okay, I’m going to need sentences with more than one word in them, Roger. In fact, I’m looking for a guy who can handle himself pretty well verbally. Someone who knows the rules of this school and isn’t afraid to take down a few names. Interested?”

“Maybe.”

“Sort of a under-cover Playground Supervisor’s Assistant. Interested now?”

“Maybe. Mrs. Johnson know about this?”

“Well, this is all very hush-hush. The big guys down-town are trying to help Mrs. Johnson out here. Lean in closer Ross.” He did. “She needs more eyes out there on the playground. Kids are getting hurt out there, threatened and they’re afraid to tell. Can you imagine that?”

“No.”

“Some kids aren’t even playing during recess they’re so afraid—sitting up near the main building still. Can you imagine that?”

“No.”

“Me neither. We thought it was Snipes. Turns out, it’s something bigger. We—downtown guys and me—we need an insider...”

“A rat?”

“Well, no! An ‘informant.’ No one will know about it until you graduate. You’ll receive a plaque of recognition on graduation day. All the kids will applaud. You’ll be a hero, etcetera, etcetera. All you have to do is just play dodgeball. Noticed you’re pretty good at it.”

Just then Roger’s mom pulled up and yelled at Roger through the car window. “Get in the car!”

“I gotta go.”

“Think about it.”

“Roger Marion Ross...”

“Marion?!”

“It’s my dad’s middle name.”

“Marion?”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“Okay. But you think about it.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it.” And Roger hustled to the car looking back at Ralph quickly as he got in.

“You’re always making me late! Move that stupid backpack of yours to the back seat. I can’t drive with that smelly old thing sitting next to me.” Roger’s mom was angry about something.

“Mom...”

“Who’s that old man?”

Like mother like son, thought Ralph. Maybe this wasn’t such a good plan. What if Mrs. Ross was a bully? Just then Josh and Jeremy came running up to Ralph’s side.

“Were you talking to Roger Ross, Ralph?” asked Josh.

“He’s dangerous, Ralph,” added Jeremy.

“Just trying to make a friend.”

“Are you crazy? Ralph, this kids got connections...”

“Are those Roger’s words?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I’ve got plans for Roger Ross and it involves dodgeball!”

“Dodgeball?”

“Dodgeball. I’m going to need a quick study of the game when we get home and all the rules—real and created—here at Lincoln Elementary.”

“Ross makes the rules up. Every day they change.”

“Tomorrow dodgeball will see a new day at Lincoln. Can you say ‘tournament’ boys?”

“Ralph, I don’t know about this.”

“This sounds dangerous to me,” added Jeremy.

The boys quickly finished their homework and then all three of them went on-line to do a search on the game of Dodgeball. It seems that schools across the nation had differing opinions about this game. Some stated it was a good healthy game for kids while others used more colorful descriptives like “dangerous, grenade launching, sadistic, uses children as human targets.” That was sober reading and gave Ralph second thoughts about his plans for tomorrow. But he really wanted to do something good for all the kids, not just Roger. He downloaded instructions and all standard regulation rules. Then he and the boys went to Lou’s Sportarama to pick up several dodgeballs.

“Okay, Mr. Twigger, what color? We got your fluorescents, your rainbow, your green, purple, blue, orange, yellow ...”

“Lou, I want the one they used back in the 60’s—Rhino Skin in red, 6 and a ¼ inch.”

“You sure know your dodgeballs.”

The boys grinned. “If you only knew, Lou.”

Ralph was quiet the next morning and the boys decided they were better off not knowing what Ralph was planning. That way they couldn’t be implicated and their mom, Debra wouldn’t kill them—just Ralph.

Finally lunch arrived at Lincoln Elementary. Ralph was there earlier than needed for playground supervisor. He walked the aisles of lunch tables greeting kids, making friends, and sharing a bite or two. Roger and his little gang always ate at one table in the very back of the cafeteria. Ralph walked past their table without saying a word.

“What’s up with him?” asked one of Roger’s boys.

“I don’t know.” And Roger Ross really didn’t know. All he knew was that Mr. Twigger knew someone or some group was bullying kids at lunch and that he was going to try to use dodgeball to stop it somehow and he needed his help.

There was a part of Roger that wanted to say, “It’s me. I’m doing it.” And there was another part of him that wanted to see what this old man was going to do today.

The bell rang for recess and everyone ran for the playground. There was Ralph standing in the middle of dodgeball court with four brand new dodgeballs and a clipboard. He whipped out a bullhorn and announced—“All those wishing to play in The First Annual Lincoln Elementary Dodgeball Tournament, please sign up here and form teams of six. Teams must be the same grade level. We begin in five minutes.”

It sounded friendly enough. Kids started giving their names to Ralph and picking their teams. Josh and Roger were quickly made captains.

Ralph instructed everyone to “sit in the bleachers please...sit in the bleachers in your teams.” Then he had each team stand and with a long pole he started measuring kids and scribbling on his clipboard.

“What’s he doing, Ross?” asked Roger.

“I don’t know,” replied Josh. And Josh was very grateful he didn’t know.

After Ralph measured everyone he started asking questions of every kid:

What’s your favorite color?

Where were your parents born?

Are you right or left handed?

What’s the capital of Delaware?

Questions that had nothing to do with dodgeball:

What’s 81 times 89?

Mrs. Johnson’s car-make, model and year?

Mrs. Johnson’s birthstone, your birthstone?

Your cap size, shoe size, favorite holiday, favorite snack, favorite teacher, favorite TV program?

The questions came fast and furious and Ralph kept taking notes on that clipboard.

Kids were laughing, making remarks. Ralph let them as long as no one was making fun of anyone’s answers.

After that, Ralph said, “Let’s warm up. Everyone line up, alphabetically.”

An audible groan went up.

“Hurry up! You’ve got one minute and counting.” Ralph clicked his stop watch and kids scrambled like ants on a hot sidewalk calling out their last names—Richardson, Stanislovski, Stevens.

In one minute every kid—about 48 of ‘em—were standing straight and quiet (although Ralph hadn’t asked them to do that).

“Now do it by first name. Alphabetically. You’ve got one minute.”

Once again, kids scrambled, but this was harder because some kids’ names began with the same first couple of letters—Marcia, Marcus, Mark, Mary. They had it in a minute and twenty-two seconds, thanks to a lot of cooperation.

“Looking good. Now, staying in alphabetical order, I need a straight line on the back line of the dodgeball court facing me. We’re going to walk off this court by marching.”

A smaller groan went up which Ralph ignored.

“Starting with your left foot first and keeping pace with the person on your right. Understand?”

“Yes sir.” Came a group cry from everyone including Roger Ross and group.

“Ready begin. Left, left, left.” Ralph couldn’t believe what he was watching. And neither could Mrs. Johnson and the teachers gathered at the staff lounge windows watching this unique recess exercise.

“What is he doing out there?” they asked one another.

After several times up and down the court, the kids were marching in precision. Ralph then started a drill: “Mrs. Johnson she’s a peach.” And all 48 kids echoed: “Mrs. Johnson she’s a peach.” And went on from there.

Ralph: She will show us how to reach.

Kids: She will show us how to reach.
Ralph: Teachers here are really cool
Kids: Teachers here are really cool
Ralph: That's because they follow rules.
Kids: That's because they follow rules.
Ralph: Our staff is the best in town
Kids: Our staff is the best in town
Ralph: They will never put you down.
Kids: They will never put you down.
Ralph: Lincoln's got the raddest kids
Kids: Lincoln's got the raddest kids

The drill suddenly came to a halt! Ralph was stuck. He couldn't think of something to match that line.

All of the sudden Roger Ross said, "That's because they use their lids."

Everyone looked at Ralph's big grin and silent instruction to repeat that line: "That's because they use their lids."

Ralph ended the drill in typical military fashion which every kid seemed to know: *Sound off...1,2,3,4...3,4!* It all kind of felt like a bit of Daniel Gordon's Ushering Training Seminar but it was working—nerds, bullies and regular kids were shoulder to shoulder on the playground.

"Excellent!" Ralph shouted through the bullhorn. "Now we have five minutes before the bell. In the next five minutes I will explain the Standard Regulation Rules for Dodgeball which we will all follow tomorrow."

Roger's guys looked at him but Roger stared straight ahead.

"I would prefer long pants on all players and or kneepads and appropriate footwear."

Ralph then explained the rules of Dodgeball in clear and concise terms. It was like he had invented the game of Dodgeball. He was old enough!

"And most important, anyone who throws this ball at someone's head or hard enough to hurt somebody will be dismissed from the tournament."

Once again, Roger's guys looked at Roger for any sign of "We're out of here!" Nothing. Roger just stared like he was in a trance. They all thought it was really weird.

"Now, kids, today was about one big word. Anyone like to venture a guess at that word?"

Cooperation, fun, Dodgeball, Mrs. Johnson's car, Delaware's capital, equality, math, playing fair?

Ralph chuckled a bit, "Those are all great thoughts but I'm still looking for one important word."

Finally Roger said something, "Respect."

Everyone turned to stare at Roger.

"What was that word, Roger Ross?"

It was one of those moments for a kid when time stands still for about a billion seconds. Roger swallowed hard and said, "I said 'respect'."

"Thank you Roger Ross! That's a better word than mine."

Josh couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Everyone stared at Roger again. Like Roger's friends, Josh wondered—*What is up with Roger? Can people change that quickly? Can a bully change that quickly?* This was very confusing and weird.

The bell rang but not one kid moved away and Ralph finished up. “Now, tomorrow I’ll be posting the new tournament teams on the cafeteria bulletin board based on what I’ve seen and heard out here today. If that’s problem for anyone, let me know. See you tomorrow.”

Kids scattered to line up and Roger disappeared into the crowd before Ralph could get to him.

Well, as you can imagine, Ralph was the talk of the office when he went to check out. Mrs. Johnson wanted to kiss him and every teacher wanted to thank him for doing something constructive with lunch recess.

After school Roger Ross was nowhere to be found. It was like he’d disappeared. No one could find him. His friends wanted to know what was up. So did Roger. He had run home to hide.

Ralph called Roger to see if he was okay.

Roger explained, “I’m fine. I just feel like I didn’t do a real great job as your assistant today.”

Ralph couldn’t believe what he’d just heard Roger say! He just figured Roger thought that was a dumb idea or something Ralph had made up. And he had—he had made it up to get Roger to respond to him.

“I’d like to try again tomorrow, Mr. Twigger. If that’s okay?”

Ralph was almost speechless. “Well, sure.”

“No one can know I’m doing this, though. My friends think I whimpered out today.”

“You didn’t...”

“I know I didn’t. Today people respected me.”

“Roger Ross, the whole school respected you today!”

“Can I give you a tip about making up the teams, Mr. Twigger?”

“Sure.”

“Put me and every one of my friends on a separate team and don’t make us the captains. Make Martinez one—he’s really smart. McMichaels always plays fair.”

Ralph could hear Roger’s mom in the background, “That better not be your dad,” she yelled.

“It’s not mom.”

You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“I’m not, mom.”

“You really okay?” It was one of those questions Ralph used to ask Todd a lot.

“Yea, I am. I gotta go. My mom needs my help with the waffles. We’re having breakfast for dinner tonight,” Roger said with a bit of embarrassment.

“Hey, we do that, too! Well, all right then, see you tomorrow. Oh, Roger...”

“Yes, Mr. Twigger?”

“Thanks for your help today.”

“You’re welcome.” And Roger hung up.

Can bullies change that quickly? Can a person change that quickly? Ralph, Josh and Jeremy had those two questions bouncing around in their heads like dodgeballs! Ralph’s answer to both questions was going to be tried-and-true Ralph Twigger philosophy, “Yes, boys, a person can change that quickly if they really feel important, needed and loved... Now, let’s get the Ritz Crackers, peanut butter and chocolate milk out. I’ve got a lot of

work to do before day two of The First Annual Lincoln Elementary Dodgeball
Tournament!”

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