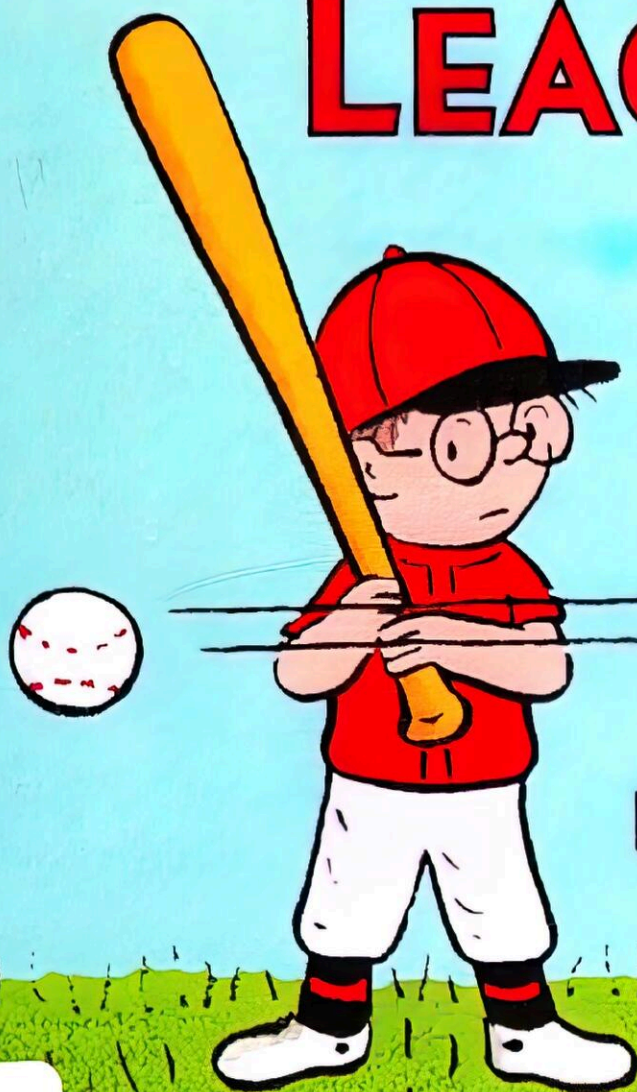


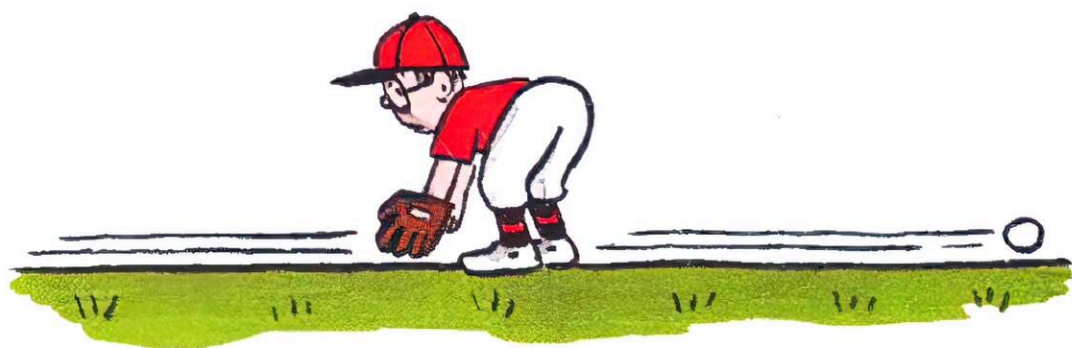
I Can Read!™

BEGINNING
1
READING

THE LITTLEST LEAGUER



by Syd Hoff



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN-10: 0-06-053772-8 (trade bdg.) — ISBN-13: 978-0-06-053772-2 (trade bdg.)

ISBN-10: 0-06-053773-6 (lib. bdg.) — ISBN-13: 978-0-06-053773-9 (lib. bdg.)

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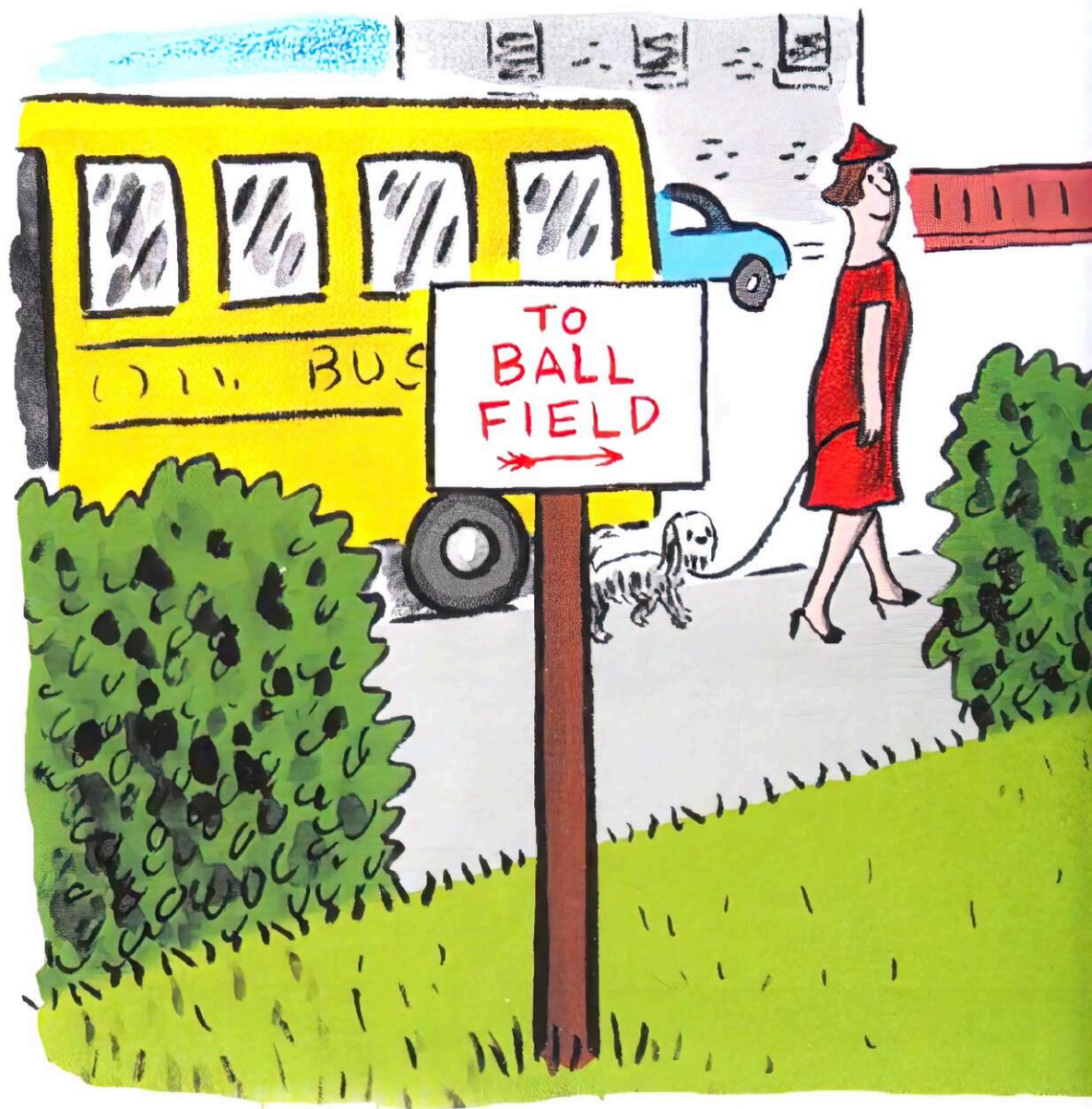


THE LITTLEST LEAGUER



Story and pictures by
Syd Hoff

 HarperCollins Publishers





Of all the players in
the little league,
Harold was the littlest.



“Maybe you ought to go home
and come back next year,”
said Shirley the shortstop.

“Maybe you ought to go home
and not come back at all,”
said Big Leon, who played first base
because he had such a long reach.





This only made Harold try harder.
He tried in the infield,
but ground balls did not
have to take much of a hop
to go over his head.



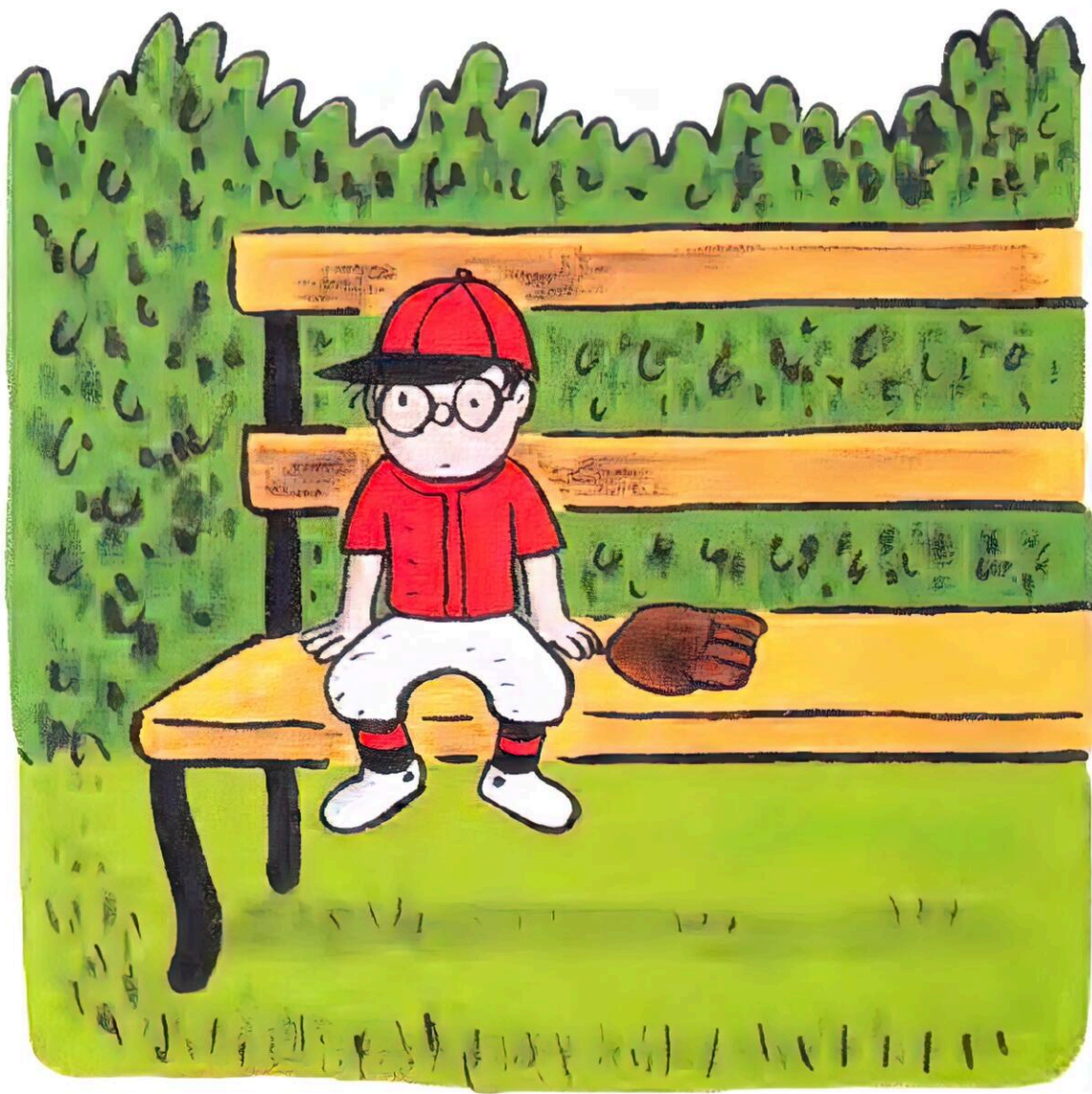
He tried in the outfield,
but the other outfielders
had longer legs and could move
under a fly ball faster.



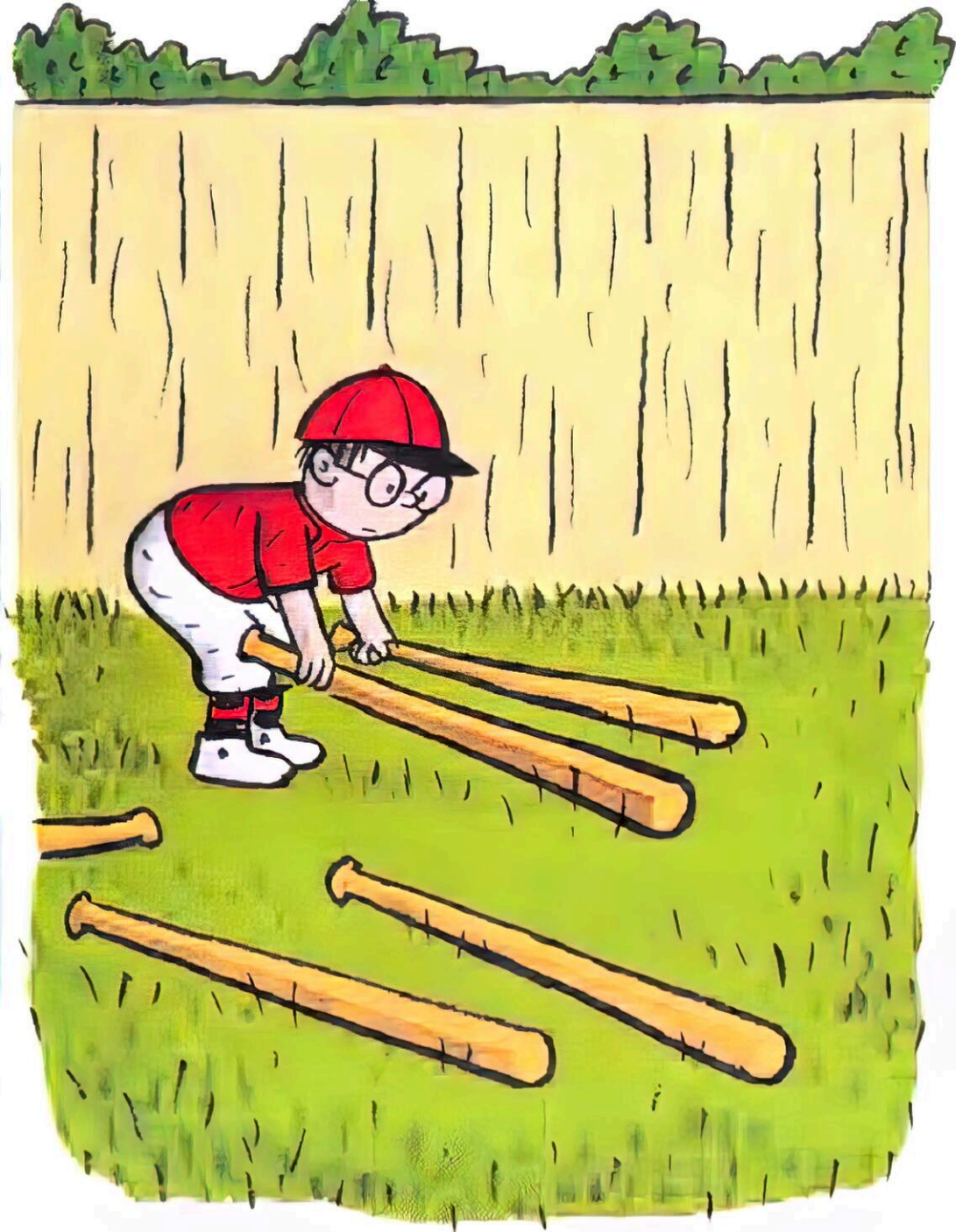
Harold tried to make up for all this as a hitter, but there seemed to be no bat light enough for him and balls zoomed past him before he could swing.



“Please don’t feel badly,
but I’m afraid there’s only one place
I can put you,”
said Mr. Lombardo the coach.



He put Harold on the bench.
Harold sat there,
game after game,
wearing out the seat of his pants.



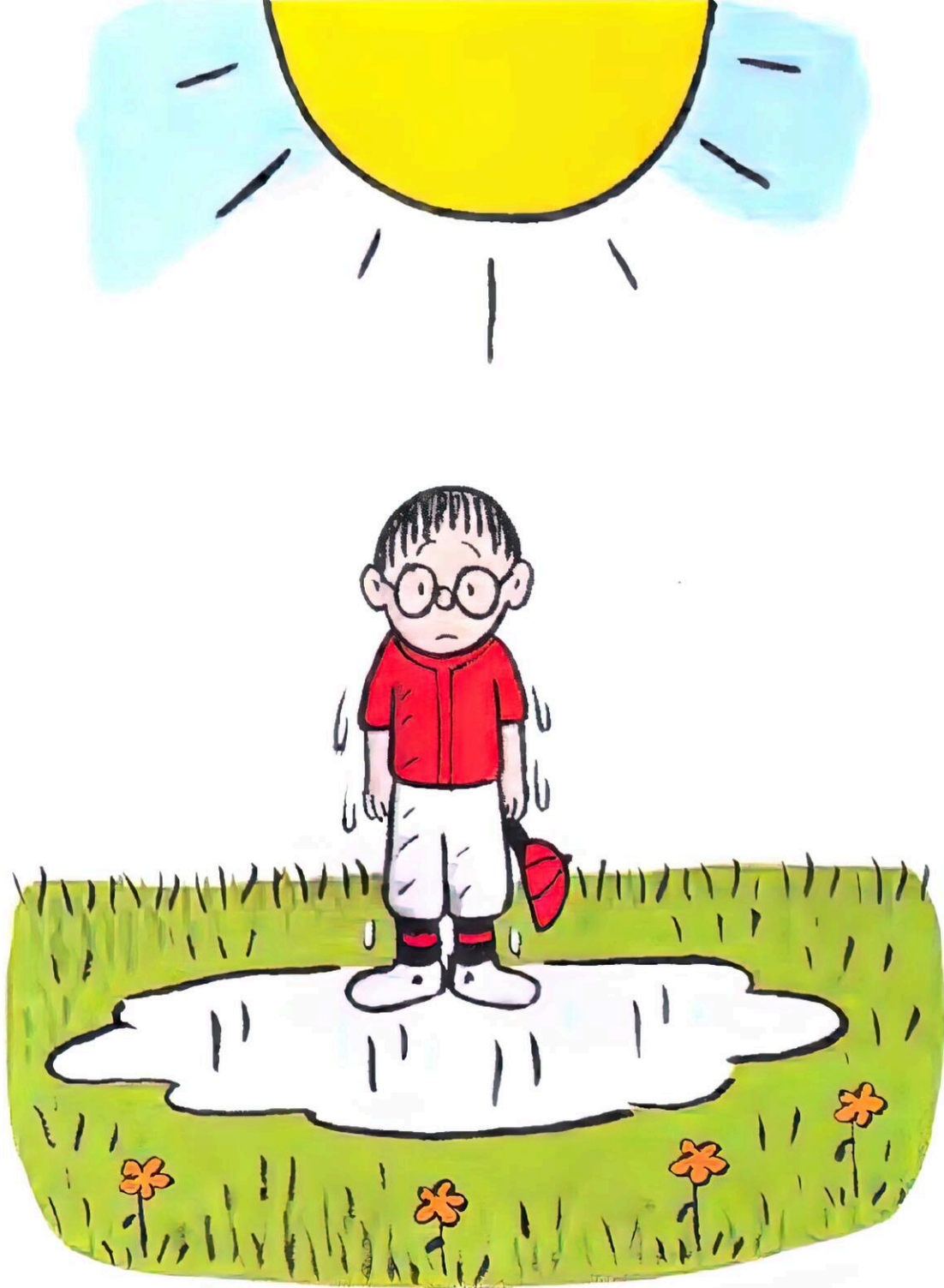
Sometimes he took care of
the team's bats.



Sometimes he brought them
cold drinks.



“I’m tired of being so little,”
thought Harold,
and he stayed out in the rain
when a game was stopped,
hoping it would make him grow
like the flowers.

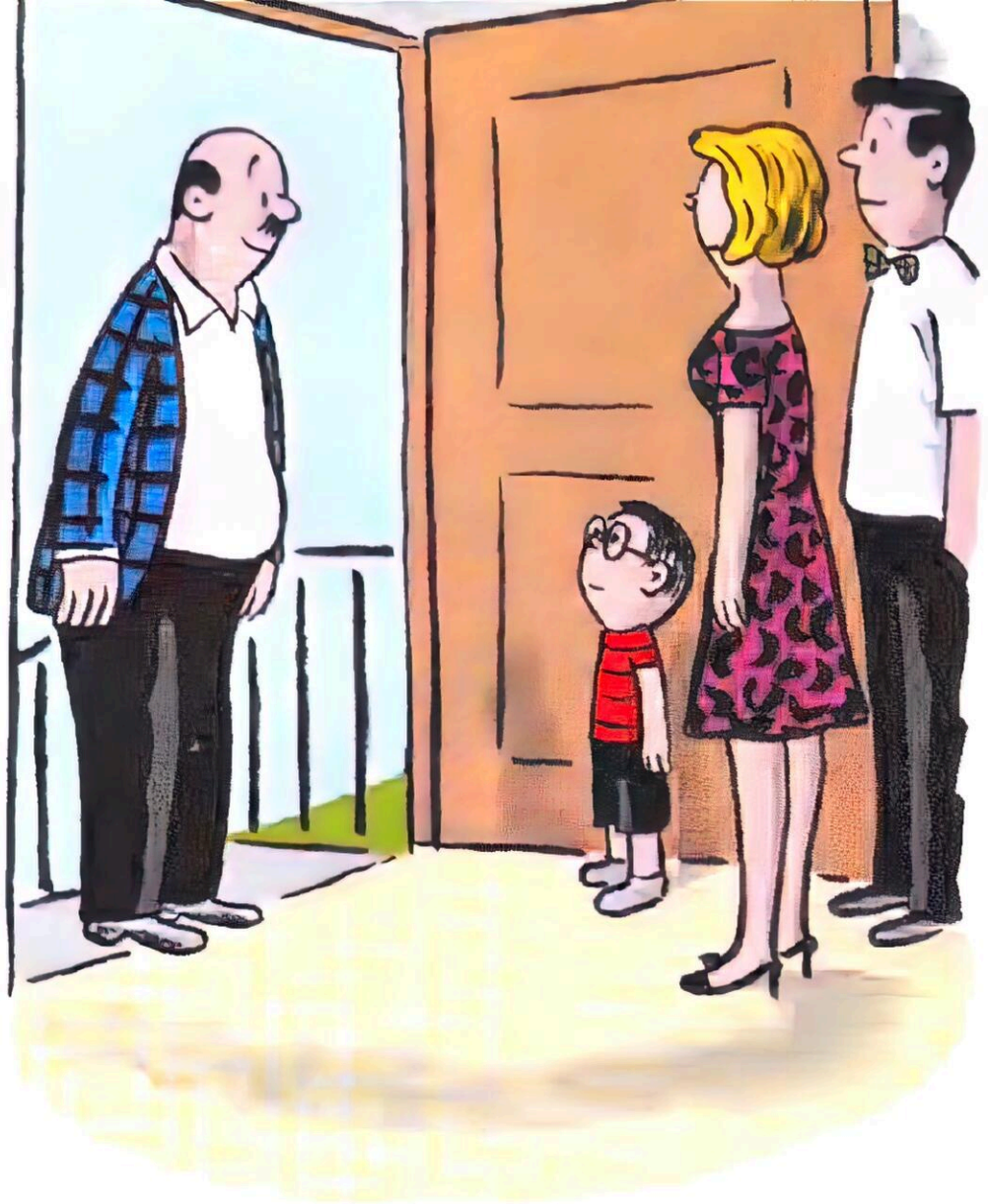


All it did was make him wet.



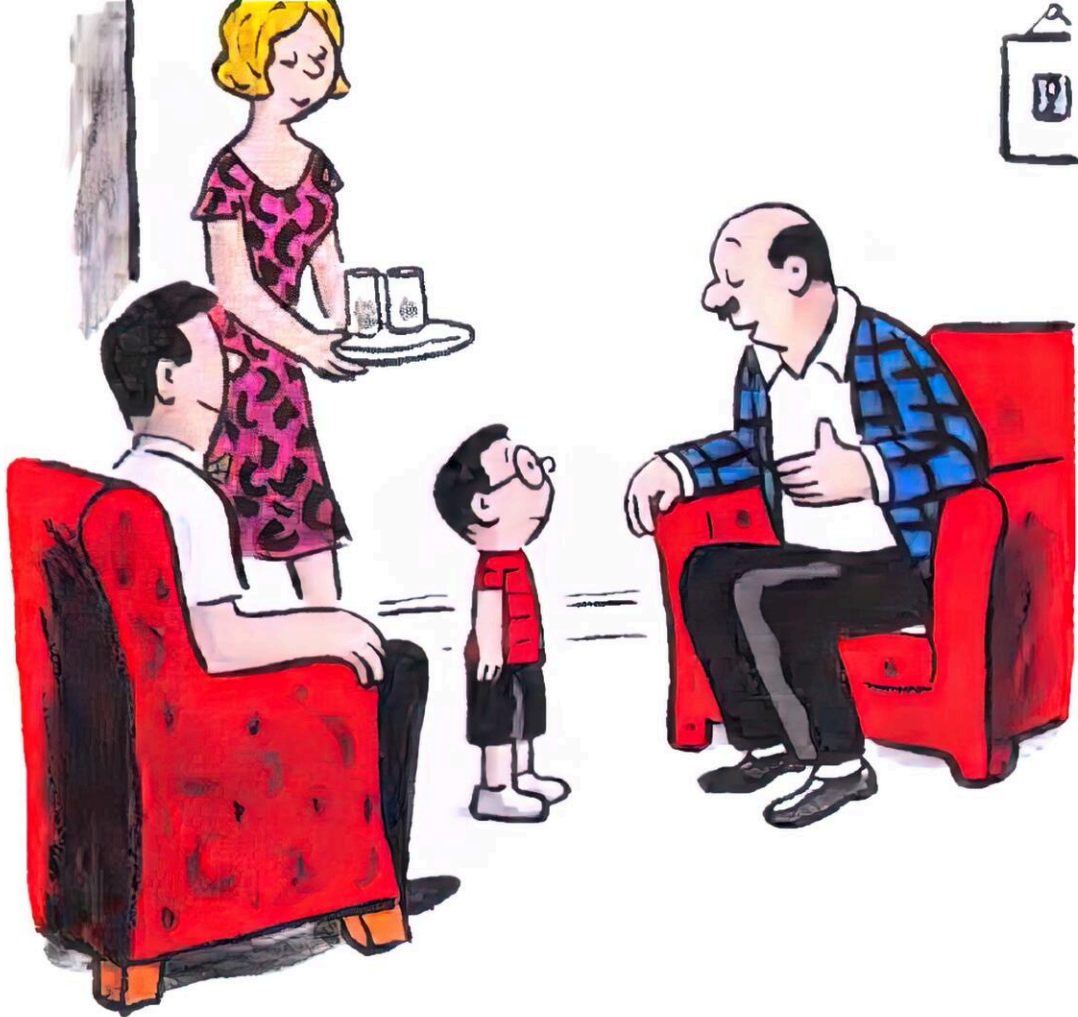
“Maybe you ought to try eating green vegetables,” said Shirley when the team went home.

“Better still, try forgetting where we play,” said Big Leon.



That night Mr. Lombardo came
to Harold's house.

He knew his littlest leaguer
needed cheering up.



“You’re letting your size bother you. There have been many great baseball players who were not tall,” said the coach. And Harold’s father agreed with him.

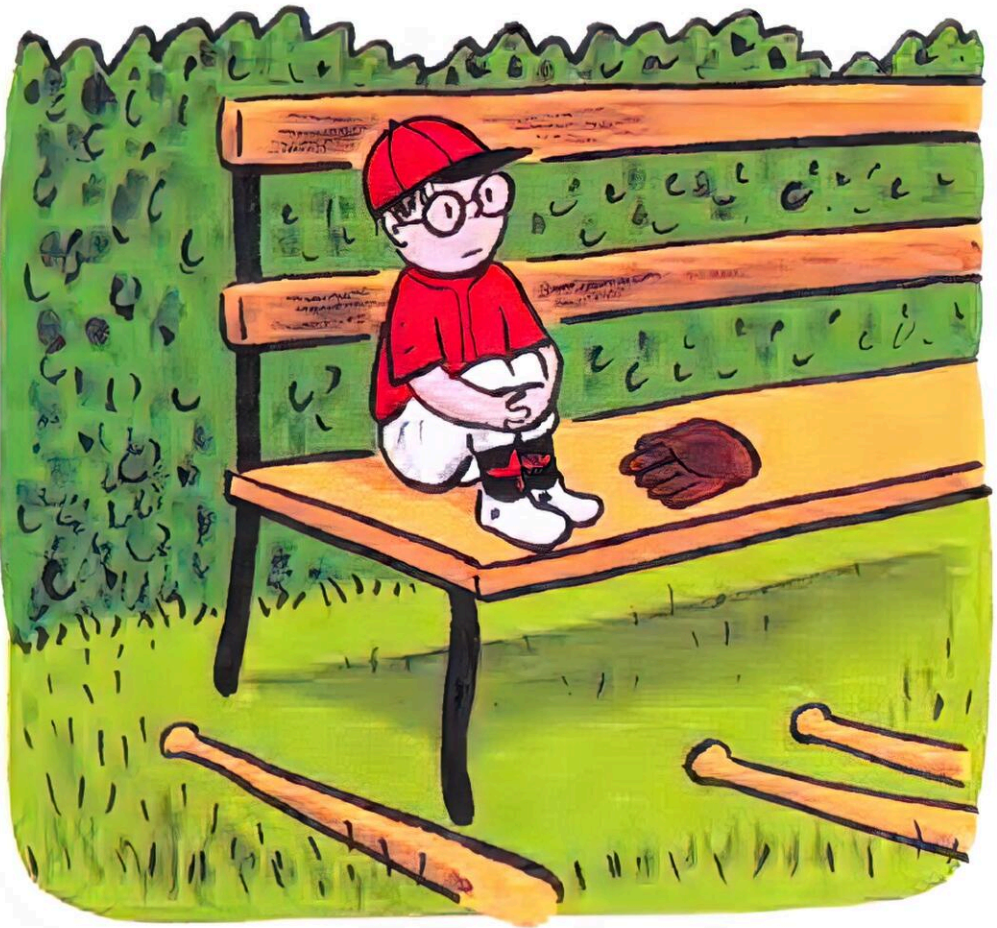


The two men talked about short players who were in the Baseball Hall of Fame, and Harold listened until he had to go to sleep.

So Harold kept sitting on the bench,
game after game,
until it was the last game
of the season.

The winner of this game would be
the Little League Champions.

The score was nothing to nothing.





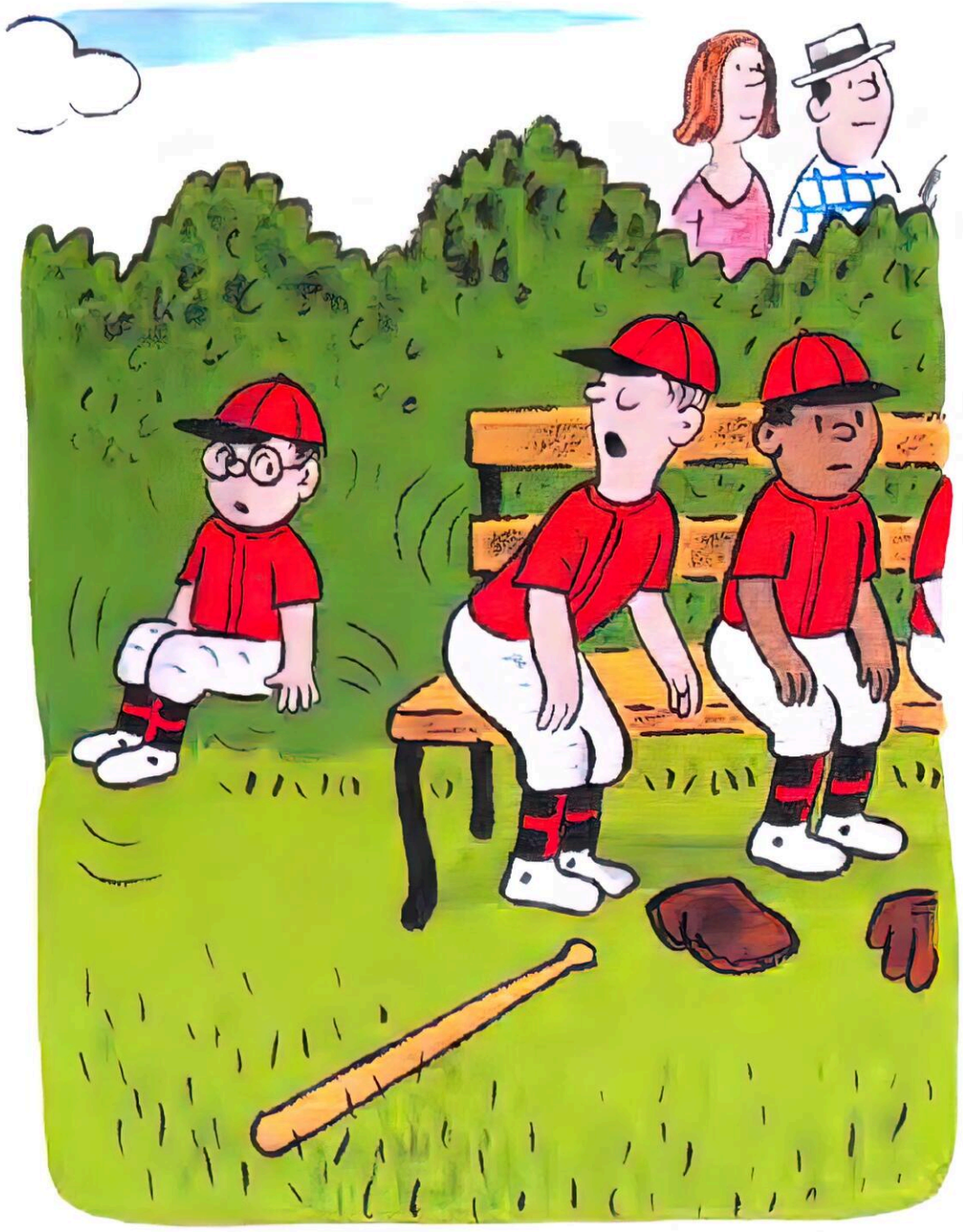
Harold watched Shirley
catching line drives and
making great plays at shortstop.
But in the top of the third
the score was still
nothing to nothing.



He watched Big Leon
using his long reach to take throws
from all over the infield
and get runners out at first base.
But in the top of the seventh
the score was still
nothing to nothing.



“Oh, if I could only help them,
really help them,” thought Harold,
as his team came in
to take their final turn at bat
in the last half of the ninth inning.



“Move over,” said Big Leon,
shoving him off the bench.



Harold sat on the ground knowing he didn't deserve to sit with the team. He just kept sitting there, thinking of all those short players in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Then with two out,
the next three batters got infield hits
and Harold's team
had the bases loaded.
“Ow-www!” cried a voice.





It was Big Leon
getting ready to bat.
He had stepped in a hole
and twisted his foot.



“I can’t walk on it,
I can’t even stand on it,”
said Big Leon as they helped him
back to the bench.



“Harold, it’s up to you now.

We need a hit to win.

The bases are loaded

and all our pinch hitters are sick
from too many cold drinks.

Will you please go to bat for us?”
asked Mr. Lombardo.



Harold walked to the plate.
He stood as tall as possible,
hoping to scare the pitcher.



But Knuckles Smith,
the opposing pitcher,



threw a fast ball
right across the plate.



“Strike one!”
shouted the umpire.

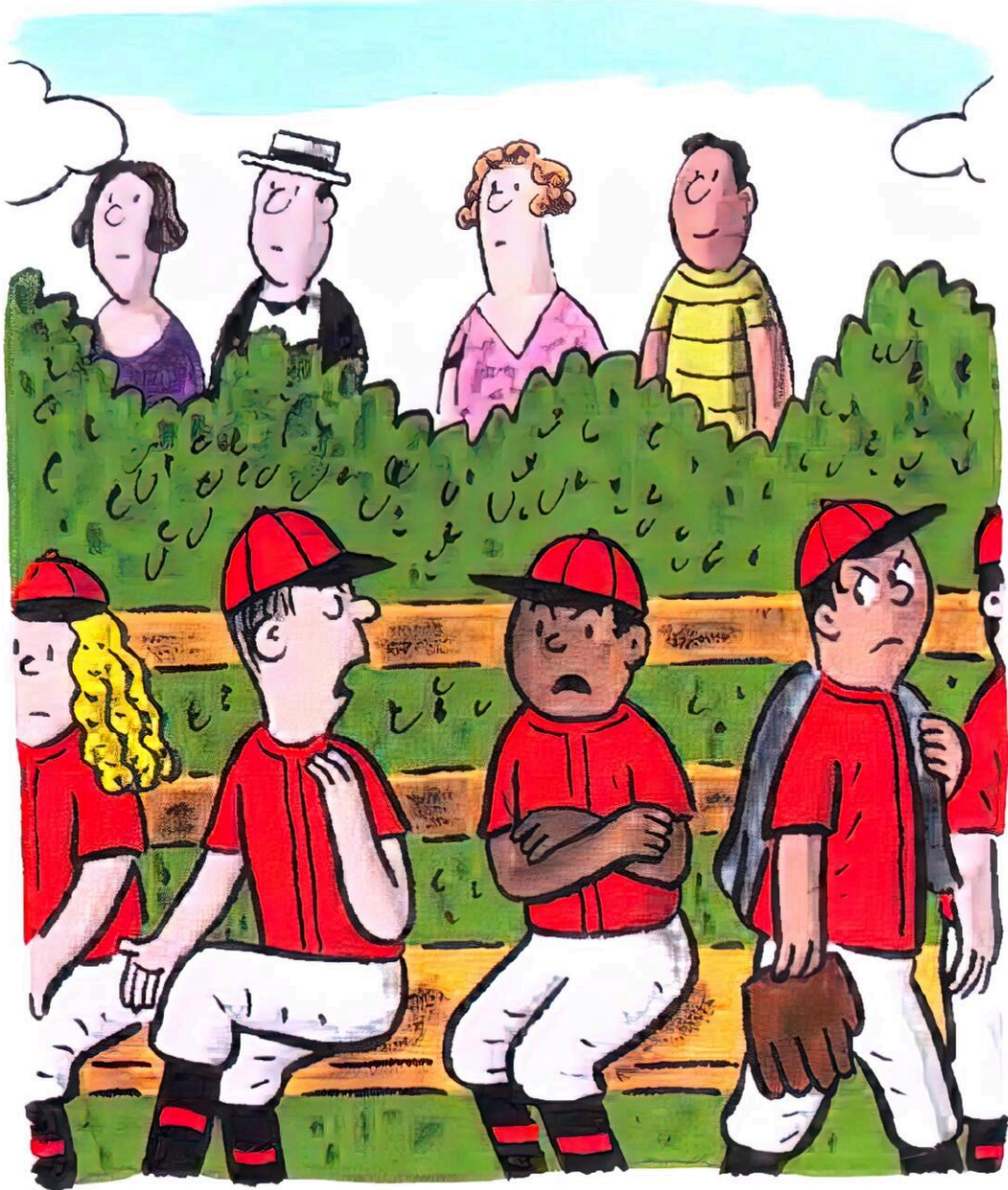


Knuckles wound up
and pitched again.

This time he threw his curve.



“Strike two!”
shouted the umpire.



On the bench, Harold's team groaned.
Some of them got ready to leave.
"It's all over," said Big Leon.



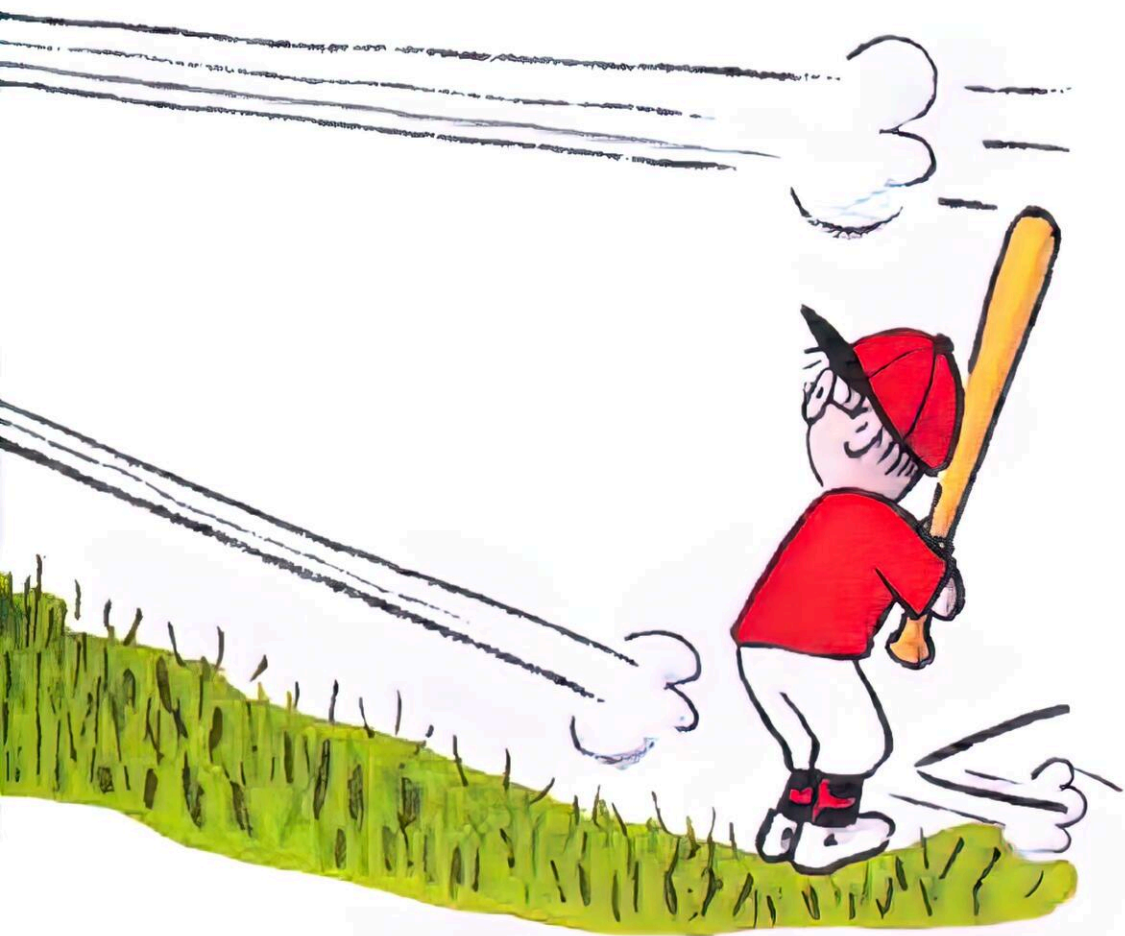
Then Harold got an idea.
He crouched at the plate
as small as possible.
He crouched so low,
and became so small,
that Knuckles could not find
the strike zone.

The next pitch came
towards the plate,
but it was too high.
“Ball one!” shouted the umpire.

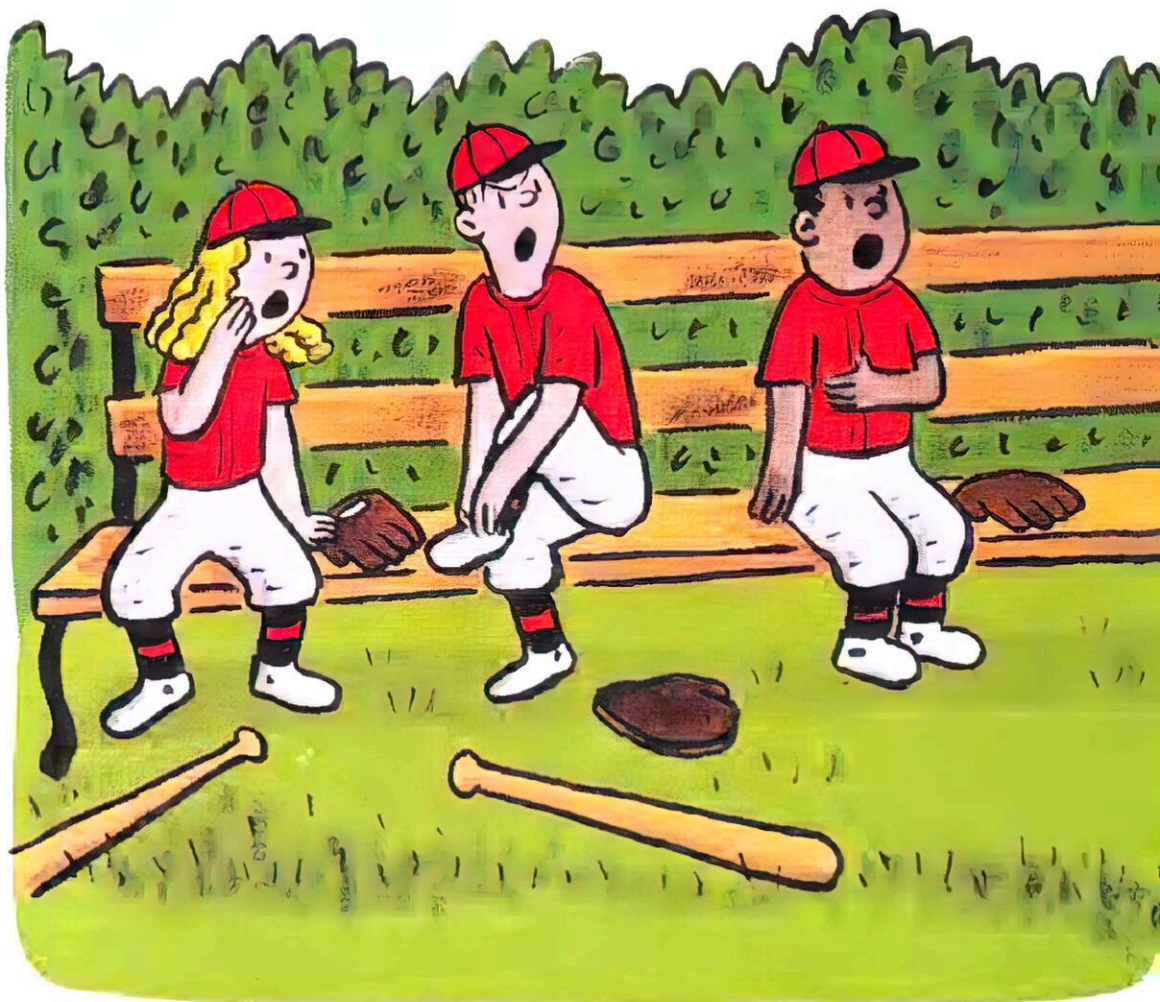




Knuckles threw again and again,
but one pitch was too low
and the other was too wide.



The count was three balls
and two strikes.



The next pitch
would decide everything.

“Come on, Harold!”
shouted Shirley on the bench.
“Keep your eye on the ball!”
shouted Big Leon.



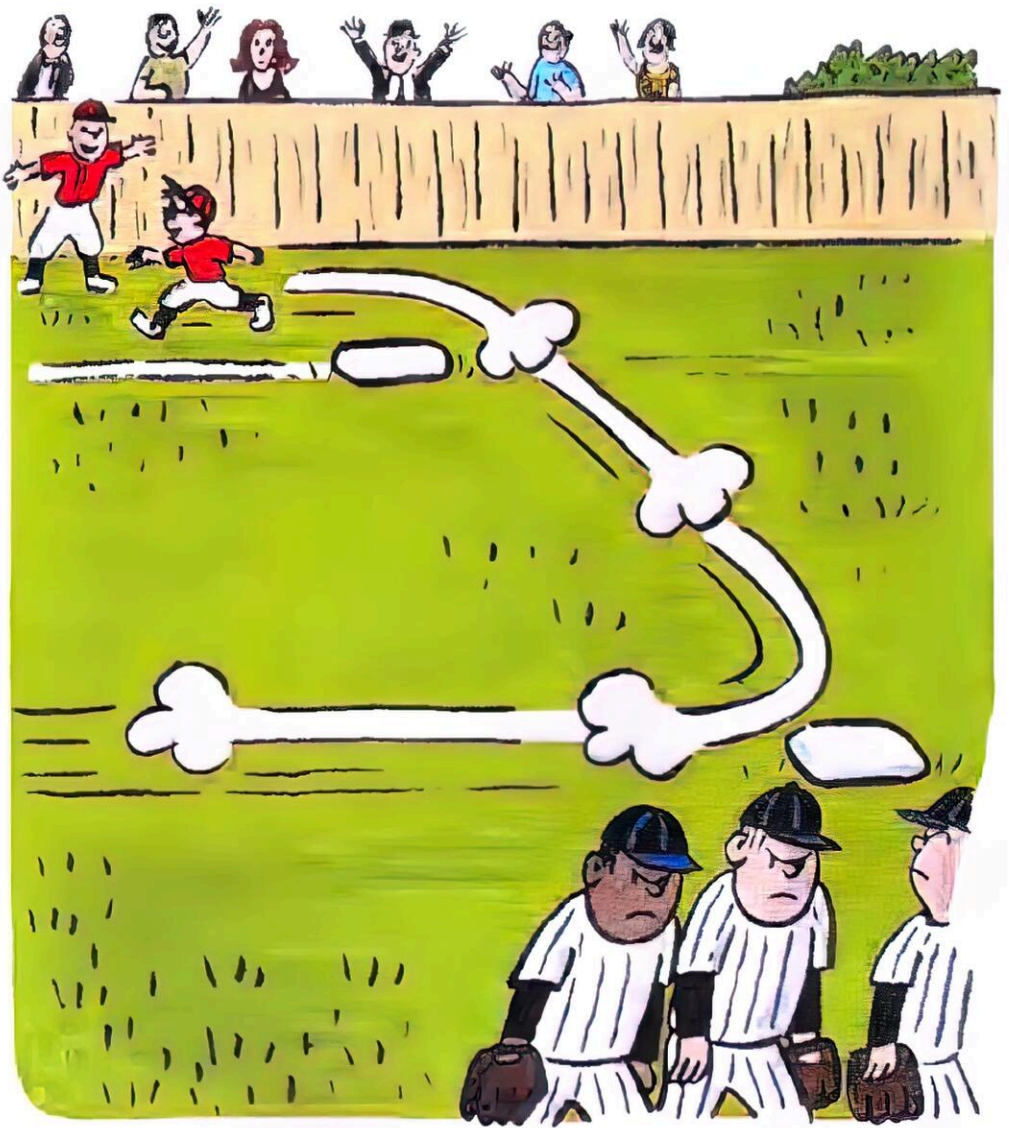
“Make him put it where you want it!”
shouted the rest of the team,
and Mr. Lombardo looked
as if he was praying.



The ball floated towards the plate.
It was Knuckles Smith's slow ball,
his change of pace,
which always fooled batters.



Harold closed his eyes
and swung with all his might,
and—POW!—he connected!



The ball was going, going, gone
over the fence for a home run.

Harold ran around the bases,
from first to second,
from second to third.



He crossed home plate and
his teammates picked him up
and carried him on their shoulders.



“Harold, you may be the littlest leaguer, but today you were the biggest leaguer of them all,” said Mr. Lombardo. And even Big Leon was cheering.