

Tackle Without a Team Short Guide

Tackle Without a Team by Matt Christopher

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Overview

For sports enthusiasts there is no better way to enjoy a rainy afternoon than with a Matt Christopher book. In *Tackle Without a Team* the author creates a realistic look at junior high football leagues and the jealousy that enters the playing field. Protagonist Scott Kramer is kicked off the Grayhawks team because of two marijuana cigarettes found in his duffel bag. Only his best friend, Kear Nguyen, believes him when he protests that the marijuana is not his. Two years earlier his brother had been arrested for possessing drugs, so the coach and Scott's father feel that Scott is following in his brother's footsteps. Later when Kear's stolen wallet is discovered in Scott's duffel bag, even his best friend believes the worst of Scott. Scott sets out to trap the culprit who has framed him. The excitement of football and the suspense of mystery combine for a dramatic book.

About the Author

Matthew F. Christopher was born August 16, 1917, in Bath, Pennsylvania, the first-born of nine children of Fred Christopher, an Italian immigrant, and Mary Vass Christopher, a Hungarian immigrant. At the age of seven, his family moved to Upstate New York where in 1935 Christopher graduated from Ludlowville High School. Christopher played sports, especially baseball, at an early age. His athletic career continued through high school and culminated when he played professionally in the Canadian-American Baseball League for a short two months, before being released for inconsistency in hitting. Still he loved baseball and played semi-professional ball while working at factory jobs.

He began writing poetry and short stories at the age of fourteen. At eighteen he entered the Writer's Digest short story contest and was one of two hundred winners, enough encouragement to keep him writing for several years through lunch hours and at night. After writing numerous detective stories, Christopher combined his love for sports with his writing and found a winning combination. His first sports book, *The Lucky Baseball Bat*, was published in 1954. Fifteen books later he quit his day job and became a prolific full-time writer in 1963. Most of Christopher's eighty plus books are for younger readers. A few, like *Tackle Without a Team*, crossover to the young adult area because of more sophisticated content.

For a brief time in the late sixties, Christopher also wrote under the pseudonym Fredric Martin. From 1967 to 1972 Christopher wrote a comic strip *Chuck White* for the now defunct *Treasure Chest* magazine. He has recently tried his hand at screenplays and has had several adult novels published.

Christopher and his wife, Catherine M. Krupa, live in Rock Hill, South Carolina.

Setting

This contemporary novel is set in an unnamed town large enough to have league football teams sponsored by local merchants and to support a municipal bus service. It is also small enough for Scott to ride his bike to and from practice and over to the coach's house. Although school is mentioned on occasion, no scene is set there. The action in this novel is strictly extracurricular.



Social Sensitivity

Scott Kramer knows immediately what type of cigarettes are in his duffel bag, as do the other boys. They have seen marijuana before and know the slang terms for it. It is obviously a part of their culture. Scott was nine years old when he tried smoking a tobacco cigarette. His old girlfriend, who is around fourteen-years-old smokes both types of cigarettes. Christopher does not condone this behavior; he merely gives a realistic portrait of the influences on today's youth.

Literary Qualities

One of Christopher's strong points is his exciting and suspenseful play-by-play sports writing. Each sport has its own vocabulary that Christopher knows and uses. In *Tackle Without a Team* the author uses terms such as "liz" meaning the left side of the line and "Red Dogged" meaning a sevenman charge through the offensive line.

He also uses phrases with which his readers are familiar. "Heart beating like crazy," "like the Jolly Green Giant," "back in the saddle again," and "cooked his own goose" are examples of cliches that work because they are used in dialogue that further develops the characters.



Themes and Characters

Fourteen-year-old Scott Kramer loves football and is a dedicated tackle. He puts his heart and energy into the game and is rewarded with praise from his coach and teammates until marijuana, placed there by an unknown person, is discovered in his duffel bag.

The moment Scott sees it, he tries to hide it from the coach. Bounced off the team in disgrace, Scott is dismayed by the event and does not know how to handle it.

Scott makes other wrong decisions before he clears his name. He decides not to tell his parents. They were hurt badly when his brother was involved with drugs, and he does not want to inflict that hurt again. Of course, they find out anyway and because of Scott's silence, are hesitant to believe him innocent. Some of the other players tell the coach that Scott has smoked tobacco cigarettes. When asked, Scott admits that he tried them once, but only once. Since he had not told his mother this before, she begins to doubt her son's honesty.

Kear Nguyen, Scott's best friend, offers to quit the team since Scott has been unfairly booted off, but Scott convinces Kear not to quit, so Kear finds another team for Scott. The Cougars are a tough team, but Scott is relieved to be playing again and tries not to alienate the players. At one of the Cougar games, Kear's wallet is stolen and Kear finds it in Scott's duffel bag. Now even Kear, Scott's loyal defender, turns on him.

Although Jerilea Townsend, Scott's girlfriend, believes in his innocence and helps him discover the culprit, she is mad at first because Scott did not tell her the cigarettes were marijuana cigarettes. Minor characters abound as the other players on both teams contribute to Scott's feelings about himself.

Some call him names because of the drugs, others remain neutral. Most of the players are presented as balanced characters and serve as red herrings for the mystery. The two coaches are contrasted as good and bad. Coach Dresso plays by the rules and treats the players fairly. Coach Zacks wants to win with no thought about sportsmanship and teaches his players to play mean.

Matt Christopher skillfully and accurately portrays the uneasy, restless period of adolescence through Scott's character. His theme and variations are boldly stated throughout the book.

Mrs. Kramer asks her son, "Don't you think you've gotten into enough trouble already for not telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" Had Scott told his coach about the marijuana instead of trying to hide it, had he told Jerilea the entire truth about the cigarettes, had he told his mother about the cigarette smoking when he was younger, he would not have incurred their doubts. Several times Scott's thoughts are blanket moral statements. He does not talk back to a player who is ridiculing him because "That would just bring me down to his level." Another time he thinks "He could



get in trouble accusing somebody he really wasn't sure about." His attitude toward football is to "play clean, hard football. And to have fun." If the mean Cougars and Coach Zacks do not like that, they can boot him off the team. "I've been a player without a team before. I can be a player without a team again."



Topics for Discussion

1. Scott's best friend is Kear Nguyen.

What type of name is that? Are there other minority groups mentioned in the book?

2. Scott seems to need praise whenever he makes a good play. Why? Does he expect comments when he makes a bad play, too?

3. Christopher names the players and tells their positions as he describes the plays on the field. Does this add or detract from the book?

4. Why did the coach not believe Scott when he declared he did not know about the marijuana?

5. Why did Scott not tell his parents about the marijuana?

6. Peg becomes a number one suspect. Why? What was her relationship with Scott? How was she eliminated as a suspect?

7. Did Scott ever smoke? Tell about the episode. How did it affect his mother's belief in him?

8. Describe the set up Scott uses to catch the thief.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Using passages from the book, explain why Monk Robertson and Rick Seaver were suspects. Explain why Bill Lowry planted the evidence against Scott.
2. Why did Scott want to avoid Peg Moore and Flossie the Glossie? How did Flossie get the nickname?
3. What sort of relationship did Scott have with his father? Why? At the end of the book has the relationship changed?
4. Scott is in trouble for not telling the whole truth. With whom does he get in trouble? Document your choices with passages from the book.
5. What is Scott's attitude toward football? How does he feel when he is taken out of the game?
6. Compare and contrast Coach Dresso and Coach Zacks.
7. What kind of friend is Kear? Why did he offer to quit the Grayhawks?
How did he feel after his wallet is stolen? Why?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 47. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987. Christopher explains his method of writing.

Holtze, Sally H., ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1983. Presents an autobiographical sketch of Christopher and his philosophy on writing.

Lesniak, James G., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol.

36. Detroit: Gale, 1992. This article contains a brief biography of Christopher and lists his works and awards.

Related Titles

Matt Christopher is primarily known for his sports books. Although his favorite sport is baseball, his books center on football, soccer, and basketball.

Recently Christopher wrote about dirt bike riding and had to do a great deal of research to learn about the sport and its vocabulary. In each of Christopher's books his stars are vulnerable and have problems to which other teens can relate.



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