



LAYNE

After two or three trips to watch softball games, Layne boldly declared she would play just like other eight years old kids. She told her Papaw, “I can do it.” Papaw took her to every game and cheered her on.

Billy, the pitcher, kept tossing ball after ball across home plate; and Layne took swing after swing with her bat. She missed but as could be expected, the ball finally hit her bat.

“Run Layne, run to first base!” The whole team and the opposing team, the parents, the coach, and Papaw yelled, “Go! Get on first!” Everybody, maybe twenty-five parents and grandparents, sitting or standing in the small bleachers, cheered and whistled for the little girl with big scars and wobbly knees.

The softball rolled right up to the pitcher and stopped. Billy picked it up and circled his mound a few times. He dropped the ball twice and slowly picked it up again.

He waited, watching Layne hobble towards first base at the speed of a turtle. But she moved down the baseline – not quite running but pushing joy because of her hit. She grinned and Papaw grinned.

The pitcher didn't want to make it look too easy for her. He moved over near the baseline and held out the ball in a pretense to make his 'tag'. Everybody yelled, "Go on!"

As she neared Billy, Layne pleaded, "Please, don't make me out. I want to go to first. Let me run." The young pitcher squeezed the ball, turned around, and threw it far out into left field. Then he said, "Go, player, go to first." And she did. The next batters made good solid hits. The game slowed as Layne moved to second, then third, and on home.

She told her Papaw that she made a homerun. "My shirt-tail really flew, Papaw." At first he wanted to explain that she scored, but really didn't make a homerun. He only said, "You sure did. You made a homerun."

LAYNE WAS A PERFECT GIFT FROM GOD but born with 'hyper extended knees'. Her knees were backwards – instead of knee caps facing the front – they were behind her.

When she was six months old, her first major operation left her in a body cast for several months. The promising results gave the family their first hope for her to walk, someday, probably with braces or crutches.

Papaw bought a little red wagon and pulled her around their big yard. They talked and laughed and made decisions as to when to mow the grass and where to park the wagon.

After family consultations with her doctor and other experts, when she was about three years old, the second operation was scheduled. She pulled on her Papaw's shirt sleeve and begged, "Oh, no, Papaw, don't let them do this again. Please, don't let them cut my legs again." Through grief and many doubts, he told her it would be better for her. "You know Papaw won't let them do anything that will make things worse for you."

She cried, "Don't let them. I'll walk and do anything you want me to do, just don't leave me here." Prayers, courage and love let her be rolled into that unknown strange smelling room.

Hours later, she came from the big surgery with her second body cast. Then, within weeks, she was home. Papaw's little helper took up the red wagon rides again. When he raked the leaves, she pointed out missed spots. When he used the mower, she rode with him. If he went to the grocery store, Layne did too.

The heavy cast finally came off and her strength improved slowly. She began to walk in a sort of wobble, shuffling, and unsteady gait. Rides in the wagon were more fun.

She couldn't climb the porch steps, she couldn't run, but she stood on her legs and gained confidence while some movements began to look almost normal.

Often when Papaw came home from work, he found her in the yard picking up little twigs and sticks. "Papaw, I don't want this old stuff to get in our way when we mow."

School age came and a new life popped-up. She had fun in school even though she was the 'little' girl in her first and second grades (she was head and shoulders shorter).

SECOND GRADE SUMMER SOFTBALL GAMES ENDED and Layne finished the season then rushed into September with her 3rd grade beginning. She wanted to play basketball. Who could stop her?

She looked out-of-place on the court; and other girls sort of by-passed her. She soon learned that only the taller kids made the starting team. But Layne remained on the squad. With all her strength and with both arms, she repeatedly pushed the monster-sized basketball up about halfway to the backboard but it never reached the basket. The determined substitute knew if she kept trying, it would not be too high to reach that goal.

Some of the girls called her the 'midget'. She asked them to call her 'number five' just like the referee called their jersey numbers during games. Number five obeyed the coaches, listened intently and clapped her hands as if she stood right in the huddle with the playing team. She worked on movements, ball handling, passing, and followed every instruction. Layne knew she would become the best ball player – anywhere.

No practice was missed and she sat patiently on the bench for any chance to get into the real games. But the season ended.

Awards ceremony, the big event, took place in the school gym, with the bleachers stacked with people. It seemed that every parent and all the kids from the whole school

came. Coach stood in the middle of the basketball court to present trophies to the top achievers. High scorer, best guard, most rebounds, fastest ball handler, and on and on.

Layne sat in the stands with her mother and her number one fan, Papaw Don. She cheered as teammates received recognition. She had learned to stick two fingers to the edge of her mouth and make about the loudest whistle noise of anybody. She told Papaw how accomplished each girl had been all year. “Oh, she’s good, Papaw, she’s real good.”

Finally, the awards were over, or so it seemed.

Coach stepped back onto the center of the floor holding one final trophy. “And, now, students, parents, and guests, we have a new category for a special award. This is the top trophy.” He held it high and waved it around for all to see. “It goes to the most improved, dedicated, hardest worker, best all around basketball player in this school.” He paused and looked into the bleachers.

“Papaw, who’s our Coach giving that trophy to? All the good players already have one.” Layne scanned the whole crowd. Don put his arm around his dear granddaughter but said nothing. She already had his vote as a real home-runner.

Coach looked in every section but probably couldn’t have seen her in that bunch. He swung the prize in small circles and called out, “Will Layne come to the floor.”

She froze. “Papaw, did he say my name?”

Don answered, “Well, I don’t know. But let’s wait a minute. If he did call your name, he’ll call it out again.” Papaw wasn’t sure himself. He wanted it to be true but he couldn’t bear the disappointment they both would feel if they were wrong.

Coach called again, “Layne, where are you? Come out here.”

She slapped her Papaw's knee and jumped up. "He called me. He called me. I'm going to get the very best trophy." She broke into a little girl scream and went as fast as her legs could get her to her prize.

The crowd stood and clapped and waved for the little girl who had been unable to play as some others. Today, she felt as tall as a giant did. Those who know her are blessed; and angels will forever make room for Layne to play and walk in love.

