

GERRI'S WISHES

By Gerri Becken



ILLUSTRATED BY C. PITTS

A 'NEW WOMAN' COLLECTION

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WISH UPON A STAR

By Gerri Becken

I had not been back here since I finished my Junior year of school. We had moved away at the end of the school year. It had been a painful experience in many ways; I lost track of many good friends. I was surprised when I received the invitation.

I had traveled back to my old high school for a special rally; a retirement party for a favorite teacher of mine. I was early, and stood looking at the trophy cabinet at Riverside High. Several trophies sat in places of honor, a few I could remember from when I was a student. Some my father had helped the school win. I then noticed the display at the top of the trophy case.

My mind drifted back over the years...

“Please Coach, I will do anything to get a Varsity letter,” the boy begged Coach Smith. “I’ve just got to get a Varsity letter.”

“Sorry, Danny,” Coach Mike Smith explained to the frail looking young boy standing in his office. “I have all the trainers I could possibly need. Maybe you could try out for one of the sports?” He sort of left the thought to hang there.

Danny had tried out for many sports when he entered Riverside High School, but had never done very well. He knew the rules and had a ‘good head’ for what was happening on the field. He just failed to show the skills needed; or rather failed to have the confidence to try to show the skills he possessed.

Coach Smith knew that his father had been a sports star; earning a Varsity letter in four sports in each of his four years of High School. Since the break up of his parent's marriage four years ago, he had been trying extra hard to please his father.

Coach Smith knew something about Danny's father that he didn't know at the time. While he had lettered in those sports, his skill level had grown in the telling and retelling of the stories. The injury late during his senior year of high school had not ruined a promising pro career, as his father claimed. In fact, he had only been lightly recruited; then only by smaller colleges or as a non-scholarship second string player.

Danny lacked much of the self confidence that separates the good athletes from the average. He also thought himself much smaller than the sixty eight inches and one hundred twenty five pounds.

“If anything comes up,” Coach Smith said, “I will be sure to let you know.”

He knew that Coach Smith meant what he said, he just didn't think there was much chance of earning a letter this year. With his Junior year half over, he didn't see much of a chance in the future for a letter, either.

“If I didn't take after Mom so much.” he thought to himself. *“Why couldn't I be more like Dad?”* Thinking of Dad's much larger size and athletic prowess, he felt small.

He didn't even think the rest of the thought that was the driving force of his life. Danny felt that if he could earn a Varsity sports letter, then Dad would like him better. He didn't see much of him. When he did, he always took Danny to a game or would watch a game on TV. Danny knew all the rules and listened to Dad tell him what the players did right or wrong on every play. He knew he was a great jock in high school. *“If only he had not had that career ending injury his senior year of high school. He could have been a pro in any of three sports.”*

Danny left Coach Smith's office and headed home. Mom was working that afternoon, as she did every afternoon, so he would be alone at home. He didn't feel much like talking to her. *“Maybe I'll try to shoot some baskets or kick the soccer ball around the back yard before I do my homework.”* he thought as he left the school.

“If I were bigger, then maybe I would have made the cut for the select soccer team.” He thought back to the time four years ago when he had tried out for the **select** soccer team. He had felt he was good enough for the team, in spite of being younger than most of the other boys trying out for the team. In the end, the bigger and older boys had been selected. He was sure that he hadn't been selected because of his small size and lack of skill. *“And then Mom and Dad split up...”*

Since the basketball was flat, Danny kicked the soccer ball around the back yard. In the small yard, he couldn't practice any long shots. He did practice kicking goals against the wall of the house. Mom had moved stuff around so he could kick the ball as hard as he wished against the house. She had even helped him paint a goal on the wall and then to mark the areas where the shots at goal were harder to block.

Kicking the soccer ball often relaxed Danny. He was able to take his frustrations out on the ball and the wall. Today he was extra frustrated, kicking the ball at the wall until the light was too poor to continue. He then went in to clean up.

As he headed inside, he noticed the first star of the evening and made a wish.

Star Light, Star Bright,

First Star I see tonight.

I wish I may, I wish I might

Have this wish I wish tonight.

I wish I could earn a Varsity Sports letter.

As he headed inside, Coach Smith was sitting down to his dinner in his own home. His wife was the girl's coach at Riverside High School. Tonight was her night to fix dinner. He liked it when she cooked. She was a much better cook and made less of a mess than he normally did when, if ever, he cooked dinner.

Coach Smith sensed something was bothering his wife. "What is wrong Honey?" he asked, watching her as she served dinner.

"Nothing," she said without really meaning it.

"Come on, Sweets, something is on your mind. Spill it."

"Well, I do have a problem at school. I agreed to be the girl's soccer coach. Thom talked me into it. I know the team has never done very well, but this year I think the girls can at least win a game or two. I have just enough girls interested to field a team. I can't find anyone interested in being the trainer."

"You accepted the girl's soccer team?" He said in disbelief. "You **do** have a problem. I thought you were smarter than that." He was unable to hide his distaste for the girls soccer team. "I think that any other sport in the school wins more games a year than they have in the last ten. Besides, what do you know about soccer?"

"Mike," she said, ignoring his last question, "I know you don't think any sports should be played unless the team can win the championship. I feel that sports offers more than just a chance to brag about how well the team does. Sports teaches young people many good skills that they can use later in life. Besides, the problem is not with the team, but with the lack of a trainer."

Coach Smith suddenly remembered the conversation he had held that afternoon. "I might be able to help you," he told his wife. "In fact, this could be one of those 'win—win' situations that you like so much. One of my students might be interested in being your trainer."

"I think most of your students would be interested in being a trainer for a girls sport," she said.

Coach Smith didn't need to be a mind reader to understand what she meant. "No. This boy is different."

"How is he different?" She had more than a hint of suspicion in her voice.

"No, he's is not different that way. Daniel is a good kid. He really wants to earn a Varsity Letter to impress his father. His father is living off the glory days of his high school youth, and Daniel wants to be like his father thought he was. Daniel is smart and understands most sports. I know he tried out for the select team and might have made it if the team coach had not been so open to accepting bribes from parents who wanted their sons to play on the select team. He lacks self confidence, so he is a little shy. Otherwise, he would make a good trainer."

"If he is so good, why don't you use him?"

"I would, but I have three trainers for each sport and they have been doing it for the last two years. I can't just cut them to bring on Daniel, no matter how good he is." He answered his wife, "How about dinner?" The food was still in his wife's hand.

A couple of minutes later, as they were eating, she asked, "Do you really think he can handle the job of trainer?"

"If you and the girls let him? Yes. I think he will be a good trainer. Why don't you talk with him?"

"I will think about it and let you know," she said, still not convinced.

The next day she'd thought about it long enough. Having exhausted every other possibility for a trainer, Coach Jones (she used her maiden name to keep from having two Coach Smith's in the school) finally decided to talk with this young man. She made arrangements for him to stop by after school this afternoon.

The knock on the door brought her out of the book on soccer she was trying to read. "Come in."

As the boy entered she looked him over. "A little below average in height, maybe he hasn't finished his growing yet," she thought to herself. "He seems uncoordinated and unsure of himself." She almost wanted to mother the poor boy. "Can't let his 'puppy dog' looks get to you. You need a trainer, not a pet."

Danny said, "Coach Jones? Coach Smith said you wanted to see me."

"Yes," she said. "I asked him to have you stop by. I understand you would like to earn a Varsity Letter."

His eyes lit up. "Yes, Ma'am, I do want to earn a Varsity Letter, but Coach Smith said that he didn't have any openings for team trainers." He then added, "And I am not good enough to make the team. I'm too small."

"Coach Smith was right when he said that **he** didn't have any openings for a trainer. I need a trainer. Would you be interested?"

Danny's heart leapt as Coach Jones asked if he would be interested in being a trainer. Several thoughts raced, jumbled, through his mind. *"I'll get my letter. Won't Dad be proud of me? I wonder what sport. A Varsity Letter! What sport?"*

Danny voiced the last question as calmly as possible. "I am interested, Ma'am. Which team needs a trainer?"

"The soccer team," she said.

"I didn't know we had a boy's soccer team," he said. "I would like to be the trainer. I think I could do a good job."

"It is not a boy's soccer team," she said

"You mean it is a girl's team?" he asked, feeling the flush of embarrassment color his face.

"Is there a problem?"

Danny stuttered over his answer before he finally got his tongue under control. "You want me to be a trainer for the girl's team?"

"Not **a** trainer, **the** trainer." she said. "I am considering you for the trainer spot."

"Would you expect me to do everything that a trainer normally does?" he asked, showing even more embarrassment.

"Yes. I had hoped you would do everything that the trainer normally does."

"I'm not sure that I can do what you want me to do."

"Don't you know enough about soccer?" she asked.

“That's not the problem. I think I can handle the soccer part of it.” he said with about the most confidence he could.

“Do you, now?” she asked. “Then can you explain Off Sides to me?”

“I'll try.” Danny rolled my eyes up, as if quoting from a book on the ceiling. “A player is in an off side position when he is on offense, in front of the ball. He's not controlling the ball, is in the defenders' half of the field, and has less than two defender players between him and the goal line.”

“So the referee would call the foul then?” Coach Jones asked.

“No,” he responded, with an increased sense of confidence. “A player does not get called for Off Sides until he is in an off sides position and attempts to affect the play of the game, by either playing the ball or interfering with the defense; in the opinion of the referee. It is really simple.”

“What about the pass back rule in delaying the game?” she asked.

“It's a new rule. It was added to prevent the goalie from holding the ball to delay the game and in hopes of increasing scoring. Basically, the goalie cannot pick up, with his hands, a ball that a player on his team deliberately kicked to him until it is touched by another player of either team.”

“You seem to know a lot about soccer. Why don't you think you can be the trainer?”

He blushed a bright red and replied, “I don't think I could hand out the towels in the locker room.”

That night Coach Jones talked with her husband. It was his turn to fix dinner, so they were eating out. He loved pizza and a local pizza parlor had an all—you—can—eat buffet special that was able (just barely) to fill him up.

After his initial hunger was satisfied by five quick trips to the buffet line, she told him the news. “I talked with that boy you recommended.”

Between bites Coach Smith asked, “And?”

“You were right about his being shy and lacking self confidence. He does know his soccer rules. If he has any technical knowledge, he might make a better coach than I would.”

“He could never replace you, as far as I'm concerned,” Coach Smith stopped eating long enough to say.

“Maybe. But you aren't interested in me as a coach.” She smiled at her husband while her hand rested in his lap.

“You going to offer him the job of trainer?”

“I don't know yet,” she said, thinking about it. Her hand did not leave his lap. “If he were a girl, I would have already offered him the job, if I could not have talked him into playing on the team. I don't know how the team would take to him as the trainer.”

“We aren't being a little sexist, are we?”

The presence of her hand was beginning to affect her husband. "I don't think it is sexist. I think I am being a realist," she said.

"Another name for sexist," he said, and then added, "If you don't remove you hand, I will not be responsible for what happens here."

"I haven't done it on a restaurant table since..." She stopped as if remembering a pleasant memory. She did remove her hand.

"Wait a minute. We haven't done it on a restaurant table," he said, taking her bait.

"Got you," she said with a laugh. She gave him a quick kiss as she headed back for more food. "And we aren't going to, at least not tonight," she added as she left the table.

She had waited nearly a week before having Daniel come in again. She hoped that she would be able to get a girl interested in being the trainer. The best she came up with was one of her students willing to trade a month of detention to pretend to be a trainer for a month.

She was waiting for his knock on the door. She wasn't feeling very comfortable about having a boy be the trainer for the girls team. "*It is a shame he isn't a girl,*" she thought to herself for about the hundredth time.

His expected knock surprised her. "Come in." She said.

"You wanted to see me, Coach Jones?" he asked.

"*He looks nearly as uncertain as I feel,*" she thought, seeing the boy's face. "Yes, I do want to see you. Please sit down."

As soon as he was sitting down she began. "I wanted to let you know my decision about you becoming the trainer for the girl's soccer team." She paused for a second. "I freely admit that I have many reservations about having a boy being the trainer for the girls team."

When he heard her speak those words, Danny was sure she did not want him as the trainer. "*Am I happy or sad?*" he asked himself. Danny wasn't too sure if he wanted to be the girl's trainer. "*Many guys would claim to be overjoyed to trade places with me. A few, like Bob Stamp, are enough of a **lady's man** to make this position work for them. Most are like me and would be afraid of that many girls at one time.*"

The coach was still speaking.

"...and, finally, I don't know how the girls will react to you as the trainer." She finished, "In spite of all that, I think you will be a good trainer; and, if you still want the job, it is yours."

"*She is offering me the job,*" he thought. "*Do I want the Varsity Letter enough to be the trainer on a girl's team?*"

Danny didn't take very long to think about it. He knew Dad wanted him to earn a Varsity Letter. He would surprise him with the letter once the season was over. "I think I still want the job," he said, unaware of what he was getting himself into.

Danny worked with Coach Jones the remaining two schools days before practice started. He suggested some drills that might help with the basics. He also set up a first aid kit for the team and made sure they had a water supply and enough soccer balls.

When Coach Jones asked him to try to find some vests for practice he asked, "Why?"

"Because I will want to split the team," she said.

"You could just have them just go shirts and-" he started to say. Danny then remembered that it was a girls team and felt embarrassment color his face.

Danny was glad that she ignored his comment as if it never happened.

Danny showed up for practiced Monday after school in his gym clothes. He busied himself setting up the nets on the goal posts and setting up the cones as the girls came onto the field and began to warm up. He knew all of the girls by name, and they all knew him. Danny was not a total geek, so girls were willing to admit that they knew him. Still, he kept to himself as they warmed up.

Coach Jones arrived before all of the girls got there. At 2:45 sharp, she started practice. She started by calling roll and making sure everyone knew each other. Only two players returned from last year's team. Five other girls had recently transferred to the school. The remaining six girls on the field were Freshmen. That meant they had only two subs; if everyone showed up for the game. All of the girls had several years of experience in Recreational Soccer, some had even played for other schools.

Coach called everyone over, including Danny. She then spoke to the team. "Girls," she began. It brought a giggle from several of the girls.

She paused and continued. "Girls and **guy**, this school has a long history of not doing well in soccer. We have not been able to beat any other school in the last three years. I don't care about that record! That is the past and it is buried. We have only the future to look toward. I think in the past we worried too much about beating the wrong team. I think we lost, not because the other teams were better, but because we worried too much that the other teams were better and we beat ourselves." She paused to let it sink in.

"This year I expect to teach just three things to you girls. They are:

1. Basics. You need to develop the basic skill needed to play the game
2. Sportsmanship. I expect you each to handle yourselves, both on and off the field, as young ladies- or **gentlemen**. Win or lose, we must show everyone that we are either young ladies or gentlemen. Remember: 'It is not if you win or lose that is important, but how you play the game'.
3. How to have fun. This is probably the most important part of the game. I expect each of you to play your best; and to have fun playing soccer. There is more to a sports program than the win-loss record. If we can't have fun, we might as well quit now."

She continued, "Practice will be after school Monday through Friday. I want you on the field by 2:30 and starting to warm up. At 2:45 we will begin to practice various

drills. For the first few weeks, we will practice our drills until 4:15. At that time you are free to leave or to stay around to practice anything you wish. I will stay until 5:30 or until everyone has left." She stopped for a moment and looked at Danny.

"Daniel has agreed to be our Trainer. As such, I expect you to show him the same respect you would show any other member of this team; including myself. We each have a role to play on the team. Remember: 'A chain is only as strong as it's weakest link'." Danny was happy to hear that.

"Betty will be the team captain for this week. At the end of next week, we will elect a team captain. Any questions?"

"Danny won't be handing out towels, will he?" came from the back of the crowd.

"No, JoAnne," Coach Jones said. "Danny's responsibilities will start and end on the field. You girls will have to get your own towels. Any other questions?" She paused for a second and then said, "Good. Betty, start them on passing drills."

Danny kept busy over the next hour. At 4:15 all of the girls left the field when Coach Jones blew the whistle. "I'll finish cleaning up here, Coach." Danny said.

Danny had not had a chance to kick soccer balls at a real goal, nor had he had a chance to practice any long kicks. Rather than picking everything up, he stayed and kicked the ball around.

"Danny, you'd better call it a night." Danny hadn't heard Coach Jones approach, he was paying too much attention to the goal and his kicks. "It's nearly 5:30."

"I guess I sort of lost track of time. I'll get this stuff picked right up and put away." He was worried she might mind his using school equipment for fun.

She seemed to sense Danny's fear. "I really don't mind you staying late like this to kick the ball around, but your parents might start to worry about you if your not home soon."

"Mom works nights, and I'm on my own when I get home. My dad lives out of town, so I don't see him much. They're divorced."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Anyway, it's getting late and you should be getting home. Promise me that you won't practice later than 5:30; okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he told her and then hurried to pick everything up.

Not much went differently during the first week of practice. None of the girls stayed any later than 4:15, and more than once Coach Jones had to remind Danny of the time. He was enjoying kicking the ball.

The team held it's first scrimmage Monday of the second week of practice. JoAnne had to miss that practice so there were five girls on each team. Coach Jones ran a half-field scrimmage.

Tuesday, Coach Jones had Danny help on the passing drill; he played the defender. It took three tries before they got a pass past him. By the time practice was over, he

was a little sore. Coach Jones noticed, and said, "I think you should limber up with the team, if you are going to help with the practice."

Danny didn't feel comfortable limbering up with the team. Instead, he limbered up by doing the same exercises, but separate from the girls. Coach Jones served as the extra person when the team paired off to exercise. Danny didn't get a chance to do those exercises.

By the start of third week, the entire team was staying after at least a half hour. Many of the girls stayed until 5:30. Coach Jones continued to use Danny more and more in the practices as a spare player.

By the fourth scrimmage he was scrimmaging with the team. Danny's ego was hurt because many of the girls could kick at least as hard as he could. In particular, Betty had a real power kick- she was just a little wild. Coach Jones began to work with her to improve her aim. Danny tried to help whenever he could during the practices.

Maybe because of his willingness to help, the girls began to treat him more as one of the team. The problem was that they were also beginning to treat Danny like one of the girls; **and he didn't mind.**

The weekend before the first game, Coach Jones broke her leg skiing. It wasn't a bad break, and she was still able to coach the team. She was not able to continue to help with the team limbering-up exercises. Danny took her spot, often pairing off with Betty who was taller than he was. In fact, Danny found himself noticeably shorter than three of the girls on the team, while two others were about his height.

After the regular practice, Danny had started working extra with JoAnne, the goalie. She could easily stop most shots the team attempted. Years of kicking the ball against the wall at home allowed Danny to kick the ball passed her easily. She took this as a personal affront and tried all the harder. Many a night, Coach Jones had to chase the two off the field after 5:45. They even practiced the weekend before the game. By the Wednesday before the game she was blocking more of Danny's shots than he was making. She was even getting better at handling a two-on-one break.

The first game of the season was against Valley High. They had been a strong team last year, but had lost their star player. Still, they expected to have an easy time with Riverside's girls.

As is common with most trainers, Danny wore the same uniform as the rest of the team; they all wore gym shorts and baggy tops. Coach Jones made no effort to hide the fact that he was not a girl, but neither did she advertise the fact that he was a boy. No one asked and she didn't say anything.

The game was not pretty during the first half. JoAnne did a good job in the goal, but they still scored once while we didn't score at all. During the break at the midpoint of the game, Danny mentioned to Betty, who was setting the offense on the field, that they seemed to be favoring their far side defensive back. He suggested a few plays for Betty to try.

As suggested, early in the second half Betty shifted the far side defender to near the center of the field and dropped a pass to Robyn as she came down the far side. She had a clear shot at the goal and put it in. The score was tied. A couple of minutes later Betty tried the same play again. Everything worked well, except Robyn missed the shot, just wide.

With three minutes left in the game, she tried it again. The goalie recovered too quick for Robyn to get a good shot.

With less than a minute left, Betty tried Danny's other suggestion. She faked a pass to Robyn and took a long shot at the goal. The ball sailed neatly through the upper left hand corner of the goal. Riverside won, 2 to 1.

The team stopped for a victory celebration at a soda shop before continuing home. None of them really noticed when the guy behind the counter asked "What can I get you ladies?" including Danny with the girls on the team. Coach Jones bought sodas for everyone. With his nearly shoulder length hair and small size, Danny fit in with the girls.

That first win went a long ways to making them a team. More and more, Coach Jones needed to chase the entire team off the field at 5:30. She looked the other way when they met on the school grounds Saturdays and practiced the entire day. There the team worked on some trickier plays; like dropped passes, headers and even high kicks.

With only two games left in the season, JoAnne had managed to block every shot taken on goal since the first game. It helped that the number of shots on goal was dropping with each game. Coach Jones worked hard to make sure the team didn't run up the score. Once Riverside had a two or three point lead, she had the girls swap positions to give everyone a chance to play different positions. Betty, who had been playing center mid-fielder, turned out to be a far more powerful force as sweeper.

The next to last game was against Uptown High. The Uptown Lady Tigers had won the state tournament last year and had three times as many students as did Riverside High. They were undefeated and had won most of their games by five or six points. They were averaging eight points a game, while we were averaging about half that.

Everyone seemed sure that our Cinderella seasons was about to end. The local papers even said, "Lady Tigers should Clip the Lady Hawks' Wings tonight."

During the first half only JoAnne's great play kept them from being scored upon. In the second half, Riverside began to play as a team again. They slowly pulled away from the Lady Tigers, and the final score was 3 to 0. The win guaranteed them a spot in the district tournament. The entire team was flying high when as they boarded the bus for home.

The local paper ran a story titled "Lady Hawks soar over Lady Tigers". In the story each member of the team was listed. They got Danny's name wrong, spelling it "Dannie". Still, it was so good to have the team doing well he didn't care.

The District tournament was to take place over a weekend, starting Friday and continuing through Sunday. Danny traveled with the team and slept in sleeping bags with them.

The first game in the tournament was a repeat of the Uptown High vs Riverside High game. Uptown High didn't want to be beat again. Their coach felt if they couldn't win "fair and square", then they would win by any method that they could. Late in the game Riverside was winning by a score of 1 to 0, and Uptown started to play dirty. Betty was the first to fall: she took a fist to the throat. Coach Jones put in Alice Anne. Moments later, Robyn, our leading scorer, was taken out by what was really a blind side tackle. The Uptown High player, a sub, was ejected from the game. Riverside was out of substitute players once Carol replaced Robyn.

In spite of being warned by the referee, the coach let her team continue to physically abuse the Lady Hawks. JoAnne was literally attacked as she blocked a shot. The Uptown High player swung a foot at her head, not the ball. She had to be carried off the field. Another Uptown High Player was ejected, but they still had six on the bench.

Coach Jones decided to play a player short. An Uptown High player made a play to take out Heidi that missed. Heidi had grown up with seven older, rough and tumble brothers. She had to be held back from beating up the Uptown High player, who was ejected.

Luckily for Riverside, the referees kept the clock running while they had a long talk with the Uptown High coach. The game ended before they could do any more damage to our team.

Coach Jones looked over the roster of the team. She was down to only eleven players for tomorrow's double header. "*There must be something that we can do help the team. Even one more player would help,*" she thought later that night. She noticed the evening's first star and made a wish.

Star Light, Star Bright,

First Star I see tonight.

I wish I may, I wish I might

Have this wish I wish tonight.

I wish the team could field even one more player.

The girls on the team were holding a similar meeting. Betty couldn't talk after the punch to her throat, so she had Heidi run the meeting.

"We have a problem, girls," Heidi said. "We are out of players and need as many more as we can get to play. If we had even one more player, it would help. What can we do?"