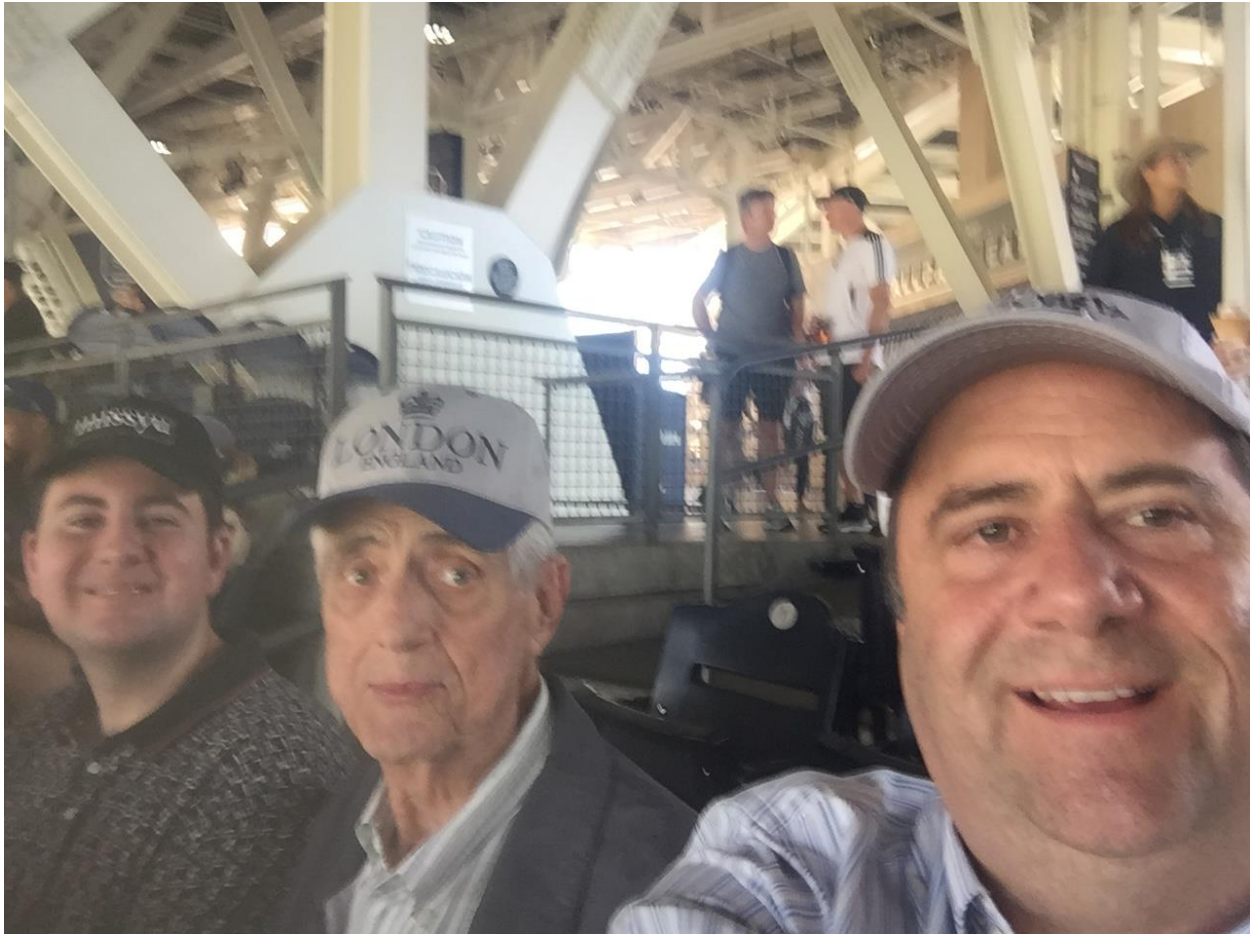


More Than a Game



Jeff Bettger

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Cover photograph by Jeff Bettger. Three generations of Bettger's (John Henry Bettger, Gilbert Bettger, and Jeff Bettger) attending their last live San Diego Padres game together. The happy crowd, the perfectly manicured field, the talented players, the salty snacks. A magical day!

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In Memory of

My father Gilbert Bettger

. . . from Little League to the Olympics, he loved it all.

My Uncle Duane Bettger

. . . Heaven is where the Denver Broncos always win.

My friend and co-worker Christopher Munar

. . . the biggest Lakers fan ever. Hope you finally got to meet Kobe.

Introduction

Sports have always played an important part in my life. I have watched sports, played sports, coached sports, and talked about sports with colleagues and strangers. Over time, I have realized that sports have been so much more than just entertainment or exercise to me. Sports have been a part of my culture, passed down to my children, and shared with friends and family. Tales of great heroes, hilarious stories of sporting mishaps, lessons learned that apply to life in general, and cherished family moments. I hope you enjoy these snapshots of life!

Foreword

Many of the poems in this collection employ various historical forms, such as haiku, tanka, and sonnet. These forms differ based on the number of syllables in each line, the length of the poem, or the pattern of rhyming of the final words in each line. For those readers not familiar with these poetic forms, I have included information on the left side of each poem, listing the number of syllables in that line or the pattern of rhyming.

Haiku . . . A Japanese form. 3 lines of poetry following the pattern:

5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables

Tanka . . . A Japanese form. 5 lines of poetry following the pattern:

5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 7 syllables

Sonnet . . . The form made famous by Shakespeare.

In this case, 6 syllables per line.

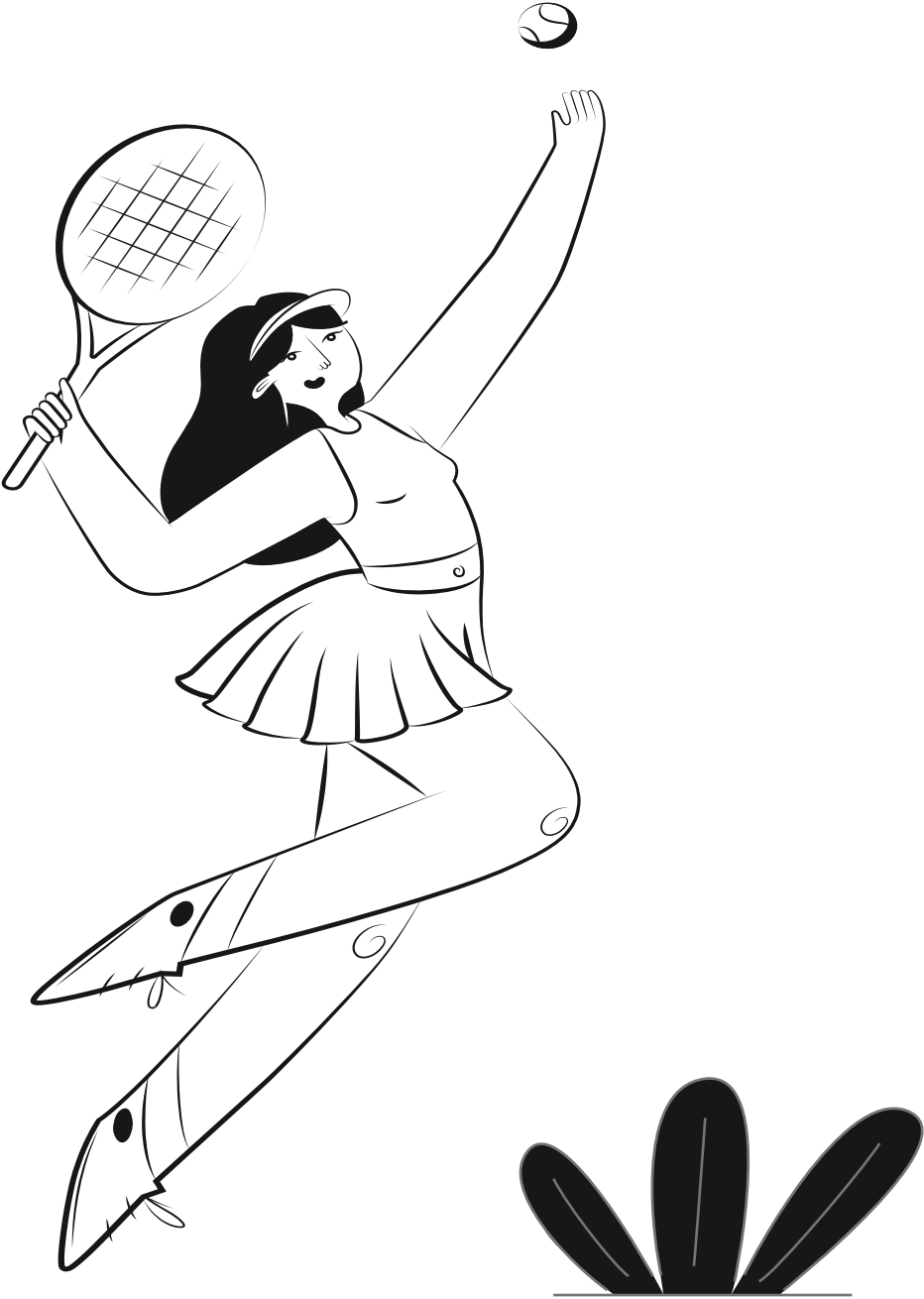
The last word in each line rhyming in the pattern:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Table of Contents

Family and Community	1
Comedy	8
Haiku	15
Heroes	22
Life Lessons	29

Family and Community



Three Generations

Grandfather, son, and grandson.

A beautiful summer afternoon
sitting in the stands, under the shade.

A professional baseball game today.

Walking to the seats difficult and tiring
for the grandfather. So many stairs,
but the effort was rewarded. A riveting
game, a cool breeze, and joyous crowd.

A dedicated fan, the grandfather knew
each player by name. Excitement with
each hit. Disappointment with each
strike. The umpire always to blame.

Shared memories gained that day.

But they did not know, as they cheered aloud,
a serious fall a few months later would
make this the grandfather's last live game.

On TV he watched faithfully the remaining season,
but spoke often about that day in the stands.

Three generations--grandfather, son, grandson.

Unwritten Rules

All sports have rules of play.

Baseball also has unwritten rules.

These rules keep the game civil.

Hit a home run, don't look at the pitcher.

Your team winning by ten runs in
the 9th inning, don't hit a home run.

If a Giants pitcher hits a Padres batter,
you can be guaranteed the next inning
a Padres pitcher will hit a Giants batter.

Probably necessary to keep 100 mph
missiles from being thrown at heads.

Interesting to think about unwritten
rules in our everyday lives. Courtesies
to the elderly, traffic merging norms,
extra patience given to mothers
wrangling their two screaming toddlers.

As fewer citizens follow unwritten rules,
our daily lives become less civil.

My Daughter
(Tanka)

- 5 The simplest joy
- 7 An afternoon in the park
- 5 My daughter and me
- 7 A toy ball and bat, she hits
- 7 With might power, Kaboom!

Representing

Yo, Yankees, baby!
Red Sox all the way
It's the Cubbies' year!
The Braves rock!

Go to any large city
in the USA, you will find
somebody wearing the hat
of their hometown.

New York
Boston
Chicago
Atlanta

A very strange phenomenon
indeed. This need to display,
for all to see, their home team,
regardless of how far away.

I have been lucky to live in
many cities across this land.
For me, a new hat at each stop.
Feeling a part of my new home.

Elementary School

I miss the P.E. class we had each day
during our elementary school years.
A time when everybody participated,
nobody left out or put on the sideline.
All my classmates, young and healthy.
Teams intermingled with boys and girls.
Laughing, cheering, and just having fun.
Scooter races, kickball, volleyball, tag.
The last time we were all the same.

My Little Man

My little man
Dressed in shorts, polo shirt, and cap
Just like his dad

My little man
First time on a real golf course
Feeling so grown-up

My little man
Jumps at the chance to drive the cart
Carefully down the path

My little man
Grabs his putter and knocks the ball
Into the hole

My little man
So excited to order a hotdog
After the front nine

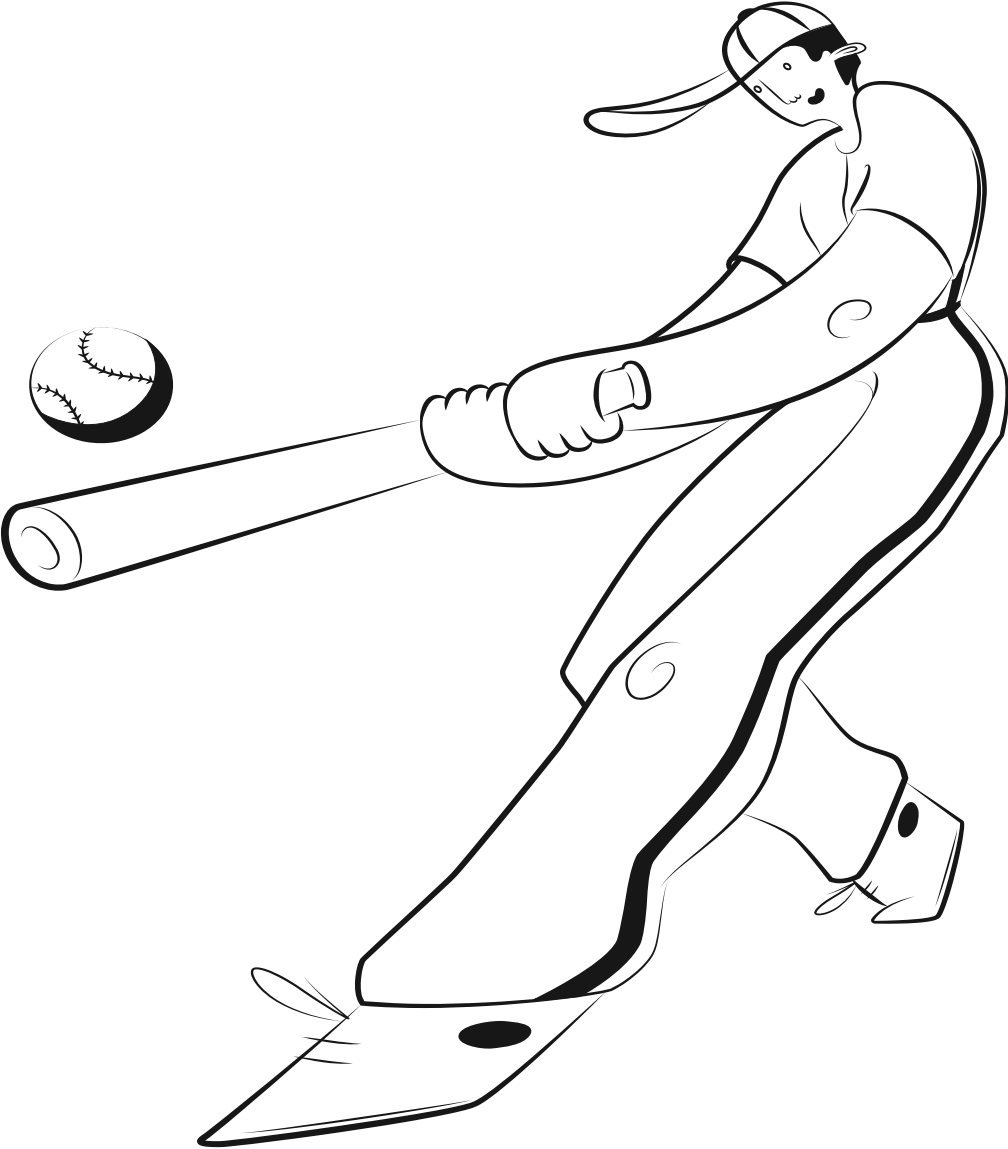
My little man
Worried about the rattlesnake signs
In the rough

My little man
Warning me the lake is too wide
As another ball is drowned

My little man
Laughing when my drive slices
Way out of sight

My little man
One of our very best days
Father and son

Comedy



Race Jitters

Four laps around
A mile race bound
At the starting line
It was finally time
Suddenly, panic overcame
Only myself to blame
Seconds before the gun
Almost time to run
Onset the primal need
I had forgotten to pee
Too late to go now
I try to imagine how
I can finish the race
maintaining a rapid pace
A quick prayer, the mile begins
No thought of a loss or win
Ignoring my bladder
All else does not matter
Four laps ran fast
Surprise, a personal best!

Coaching (Tanka)

- 5 Little League Baseball
- 7 Coaching for the first season
- 5 Young players, dirt field
- 7 Third base begins to kick rocks
- 7 Hey, please pay attention, now!

The Weight Room

Entering a weight room for the first time.
My freshman year in high school.
Unsure of how to use the machines.
Careful not to drop a dumbbell on my toes.
Wondering if my biceps had grown yet?
Pleasantly surprised I was good at pull ups.
Sat on a bench, bent legs lifted weights up.
My strong runner's legs made this easy.
Enjoying my success, lifting heavier weights.
The next morning, my first classroom #201.
I reached the staircase. The immediate horror!
My numb legs could not climb the stairs!
Panic quickly turned into embarrassment.
I was forced to use the rail to pull myself up.
Step by step I slowly climb to the second floor.
Punishment for my previous day's arrogance.
A lesson well remembered during future training.

Company Golf Tournament

Always that one guy

Hi-tech latest golf clubs

New bright red shirt

Lights a cigar on the first hole

A cocky strut

Talks extra loud

Wants all eyes on him

First swing of the day

Massive hook left

Blames the \$500 driver

With carbon shaft and

Titanium over-sized head

Tennis
(Tanka)

- 5 We gather Sunday
- 7 mornings at the local park
- 5 tennis is our game
- 7 exercise is the excuse
- 7 social fun is the reward

Time to Quit

I was never a great baseball player. Each year of Little League, I listened to the coach and always did my best. But to be honest, I struck out more often than not and was afraid of dropping a ball hit hard to me while playing outfield. It seemed that most of the other boys were just bigger than me. I concluded that my skinny body was not meant for baseball.

When I was eleven, the first day of the new season arrived. Coach had us play catch to warm up. Not soft toss like in the backyard. The boys were throwing the balls much harder than in previous years. Stepping onto the field, someone shouted my name. As I turned around, a ball struck me square in the nose. The gusher of blood confirmed my decision. I officially ended my baseball career that moment. Body intact.

Haiku



Baseball

Gorgeous summer day

Azure sky, kelly green grass

Picturesque ball field

Discipline

Rising early each
morning, never a day off
training, improving

Football

A brisk winters day

True fans gather, cheer their team

Victory they yearn

Golf

Like a green pasture

Chasing a little white ball

Four friends share nature

Respite From the World

Sad news in the world

Sports providing a needed

distraction of joy.

Track and Field

Quarter mile track

Hurdles, high jump, shot put ring,

White stripes mark the lanes

Heroes



Ali, Boma Ye!

Ali, Boma Ye!

Ali, Boma Ye!

Ali, kill him!

Shouted the Congolese fans
as Muhammad Ali defeated
the intimidating George Foreman
for the World's Heavyweight title
in their famous battle known as
"The Rumble in the Jungle"

Ali, Boma Ye!

Ali, Boma Ye!

Shouted adoring American fans
many years later. A Parkinson's
impaired Muhammad Ali entered
an auditorium to sign autographs.

The athlete, poet, conscientious objector.

As I shook his hand, The Greatest smiled at me.

He saw in my eyes how much he meant to me.

In the Land of Shakespeare

Sonnet

- a In the land of Shakespeare
b once a year fans gather.
a Tennis players they cheer
b Connors, Williams, Laver.
- c Perfectly cut grass courts
d Wimbledon championship.
c Polo shirts, bleached white shorts
d strawberries, champagne sip.
- e Down the line, blazing serves
f Forehand, backhand, volley.
e Reflexes, steady nerves
f Judges on high to see.
- g Borg, Martina, Becker
g names that live forever.

My Champion

When I was young, I had many sports heroes. But none bigger than Hulk Hogan (figuratively and literally). I was too young to care if Wrestling was a real sport or not, or if it was real at all. But I loved how this real-life superhero could make the audience jump to its feet as he entered the ring. Exciting the crowd as he flexed his giant muscles and tore off his shirt. No villain was too large or too devious to conquer my Champion. Often beaten to the ground and on the verge of defeat, he began pumping his arms to the encouragement of his Hulkamaniac fans. The wild look in his eyes letting all know he would not lose. Throwing his opponent into the ropes, Hulk would kick him with a big boot, then drop his leg across their chest. A quick count of three and the match was over. The referee then raising Hulk's arm and championship belt for all to see. His joyous fans again celebrating their hero. For at least one more night, all was well in the world.

He Knew Right Away

The world's record
for the men's shotput
stood for 33 years
before a giant man
shattered the record
in Eugene, Oregon
in front of his fans,
family and Grandfather.

Before the 16 pound
cannonball hit the ground,
Ryan Crouser had already
raised his arms in celebration.
Perfect speed, power, technique.
He knew it was a record throw.
They say timing is everything.
His proud Grandfather passed
away only a few weeks later.

Quiet But Mighty (Elegy)

Colorado was void of a professional baseball team during my youth. So each year, a new favorite team and player I chose. The Cincinnati Reds' Johnny Bench and Pete Rose. The Oakland A's Reggie Jackson. The California Angels' Rod Carew. Within this unfaithfulness, however, one player remained a constant choice. The Pittsburgh Pirate's outfielder, Roberto Clemente. A quiet and shy man with an unusual galloping stride around the bases. But he could hit and catch like no other. He won individual awards and led the Pirates to two World Series championships. But at his prime, he perished in a small plane crash en route to Nicaragua providing support for earthquake relief. The news was devastating. A legend in the baseball world had played his last game. The irreplaceable native son of Puerto Rico had gone too soon. The heartbreak remains.

Special Olympics

If asked to pick the greatest sports moments of my life, I would quickly answer, coaching Special Olympics Basketball. Everything great about sports was present. The comradery, the small improvements, the fun, the delight of the games. And those marvelous, unexpected moments--a winning basket at the buzzer, a tournament championship. But one moment I will never forget. Our best player ROLLING the ball the length of the court. An open player at the other end, easily picking it up and scoring. So genius! Had he thrown the ball, the pass would have been too difficult to catch. An amazing decision by an amazing athlete. As I look back now, one lesson repeated. Use whatever talent you possess to the best of your ability. That is the heart of Special Olympics. That is the heart of all sports.

Life Lessons



Daily Run

When I was young,
each day, a run.
All four seasons without excuse.
My shoes slapping
hot pavement,
brittle leaves,
crunching snow,
or new grass.

Faster or slower
it did not matter,
my youthful body
obeyed any desire.

Scorching heat
my face sweating.
Freezing mornings
my lungs burning.
Sprinting up hills
my legs aching.
Racing farmyard dogs
my heart pounding.

Not since, so free.
Not since, so alive.
When I was young,
each day, a run.

Grace in Sports

Many sports, violent clashes of body to body.

Or an object struck with great ferocity.

However, some sports contain elements of artistic beauty and grace, whether judged or not.

Kristy Yamaguchi performing elegant spinning jumps on the ice, landing on narrow metal blades, winning an Olympic Gold medal in figure skating.

Dr. J gracefully floating, elevating above the rim, dunking the basketball majestically through the hoop.

Allison Felix gliding 400 meters, another medal won.

Roger Federer returning backhand volleys effortlessly.

Simone Biles performing impossible gymnastic moves.

Lionel Messi performing magic tricks on the pitch.

All these athletes, their movements so inspiring.

A lofty goal for all, a life lived with grace and beauty.

Time Stood Still

Maybe the lightest player on the Junior High football team. Clearly still a skinny boy, while others were entering their manhood. Heavy shoulder pads and large helmet making vision and running at full speed difficult. The coach decided to make me a wide receiver, being too small to block or to run the ball. An uneventful season. Luckily no broken bones. Frankly, thankful I never was the target of a jarring tackle by a monstrous opponent. One shining moment. The quarterback signaled me to run deep and be ready to catch his pass. The defense had ignored me and there I stood, all alone, twenty yards down the field. The quarterback threw a high and perfect pass my way. Yes, time had stopped as I watched the ball arc towards me. Plenty of time to pray that I would catch the ball. Plenty of time to notice all the defensive players running towards me. Catch the ball. Catch the ball. I repeated to myself.

As the ball finally reached me, the pass landed perfectly in my outstretched hands. Normally, a receiver would run after catching the ball. Not me. So focused on not dropping the ball, I fell to the ground, untouched. But I was a hero that day. My team's longest pass play of the season. Win or lose that game, I don't remember. But I remember that ball sailing like a rainbow to me. I had caught that ball. Yes, I had caught that ball.

The Relay Race

(Tanka)

- 5 Four runners prepare,
- 7 moving the baton around
- 5 the track, one by one.
- 7 Each pass perfect, do not drop.
- 7 Cross the tape first, team glory.

Too Fast

The end of the track season. Final meet.
I qualify for the conference championship.
Time to see what I really can do.
No pressure, no expectations, nothing to prove.
I am in great shape, ready for a peak performance.
Previous week, I ran my personal best time on a
hideous dirt track. I know I can run faster!

It's a perfect overcast day, a slight chill in the air.
Ideal for running. A magical feeling all around.
A new track with a hi-tech running surface.
Colorful uniforms abound. Nervous stretching.
Loud cheers as each race begins and ends.
The winners will go to the State Meet in two weeks.
Everyone else will go home for the summer.

The loudspeaker calls out, "Boys Mile, please report."
I remove my sweats, take a final sip of water.
I am super-charged with energy and adrenaline.
I step to the starting line and look around in awe.
Standing beside me, two seniors. Last year's State
Champion and the runner-up. The Best of the Best.
"This is going to be a great race," I think to myself starstruck.
The gun goes off and I sprint off the starting line.
The first lap passes as a blur. Bodies jostling for position.
The second lap. I am gliding effortlessly around the track.
No thoughts, only the jersey in front of me
magnetically pulling my body around the track,
a primal rhythmic pumping of my knees and elbows.
All my years of work and training had brought me here.

But then... as the third lap begins, my mind panics. I realize I am in the lead pack with the four top runners, all seniors. Abruptly, everything begins moving in slow motion.

Oh no, I've made a mistake

What am I doing here?

I've gone out too fast

I'll never be able to finish at this pace!

As my mind searches for a plan and calculates lap times, I realize that my pace has decreased drastically.

I have fallen back into the second group.

My mind tells me "This is where you belong."

The fourth lap begins. My mind still in chaos, pain in my legs, my arms heavy, fire in my lungs.

Yet, to my surprise, the leaders are not far ahead.

With only 200 yards to go, the top two runners begin their duel with an incredible sprint to the finish line.

When I finish, I hear my second fastest time ever.

Instead of happiness, however, disappointment.

I could have, I should have stayed with the leaders.

There was nobody to blame but myself. I gather my things, jog to warm down, and then cheer on my friends.

It had been a wonderful day, but on the long bus ride home,

I replayed the race in my mind over and over again.

The regret remains even today, knowing I could have done better. Knowing I had not truly given it my all.

Knowing I had lacked confidence at the crucial moment.

This one sporting moment turned into an important life lesson.

Never again would I be afraid to run with the leaders.

The Underdog

Why do we so often root for the underdog?

Why do Hollywood movies typically spotlight underdogs?

Maybe because only a few competitors are ever favored.

Maybe because the favored ones have unfair advantages.

Maybe because an enormous effort is needed
for an underdog to win against a favored opponent.

Maybe because we see ourselves as underdogs
so often in our personal and business lives.

Maybe because the emotional response is so great
when, at last, the underdog triumphs in victory.

The End!
Thank you!



About the Author

Jeff Bettger is a real estate agent in Chula Vista, CA and a past professor of special education. His poetry writing began in earnest while taking care of his ill father. During that time, he discovered poetry's healing power. A tribute to his father and other samples of Jeff's poems, awards, and publications can be found on his website www.JeffBettgerPoetry.com. Jeff's poems employ a wide range of forms and cover a broad range of topics, typically optimistic in nature. Jeff is also the co-host of a community-themed video podcast www.SouthBayFM.com in which local educators, business owners and elected officials are interviewed. Jeff's newest endeavor is as the editor/publisher of www.TheTowneLocalBonita.com, a community-based monthly magazine. Jeff's long-term writing goal is to encourage a wider range of people to read and write poetry, especially teens and seniors.