

Teen Librarian Toolbox

Opportunities Instead of Opponents: Exploring Competition in New Middle-Grade Series, a guest post by Mary Amato

SEPTEMBER 22, 2021 BY [AMANDA MACGREGOR](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

We give our kids lots of opportunities to compete, whether it's in sports, academics, or the arts. We teach them to train physically, to grind through the drills, to build up their strength, speed, stamina—whatever the performance requires. But how do we teach our kids to develop a healthy mindset toward competition?

One way is to make sure and share real-life stories of goodwill between athletes. Take this year when Qatar's Mutaz Barshim and Italy's Gianmarco Tamberi decided, after tying, to share an Olympic gold in the men's high jump at the Tokyo Games rather than settle the score with a jump off. Each agreed that their opponent deserved the medal as much as they did. "This is beyond sport," Barshim said, according to Time Magazine. "This is the message we deliver to the young generation."

[Life Lessons From Sport and Beyond](#), the inspiring and information-packed podcast from British sports commentator Simon Mundie is full of such stories from world-class athletes, coaches, and psychologists and can be a great teaching tool.

But what else can we—the teachers, coaches, media specialists, and parents—do on the ground, at school, or at home to help our children and teens when they come face to face with the negative aspects of competition? How do we help them deal with specific emotions that can arise during competitive experiences, emotions such as toxic jealousy, defeatism, or self-loathing?

As a children's and YA book writer, I am exploring this in my new middle-grade fiction series called **Star Striker**. In the first book, **Game On!**, the main character Albert is overwhelmed with jealousy during his first middle-school band concert when his rival on the soccer field, Trey Patterson, steps out to perform a special saxophone duet with Albert's crush, a classmate named Jessica.

As Mr. Chambers introduced the name of the song, Albert continued to drill his glare at Trey's back, his jealousy a hot magma bubbling throughout his body. A series of fantasies fired through his mind: Trey tripping, Trey blowing a hideously wrong note, the audience laughing, the audience booing, the audience throwing rotten tomatoes, Trey having a panic attack, a legion of vampire bats swooping down from the rafters and chasing him off the stage . . . Fail, Trey, Fail.

Yes, Albert's jealousy is extreme, but some of level jealousy is a common response to competition—and it never feels good. It's hard to get into the positive flow state that makes for a great performance or to enjoy performing when your mind is churning with negativity. And it's hard to sustain a life-long love for your art or your sport if your experience is mired in emotional toxicity.

In **Game On!**, Albert learns a three-step meditation from his extraordinary new coach Kayko, and this helps him on the field, at home, and on stage. Here is the nutshell:

1. Accept without judgement what you are feeling.
2. Send kind thoughts to yourself.
3. Send kind thoughts to the person with whom you are in conflict (an opponent, a rival, etc.)

My boiled-down, three-step recipe is based on a combination of the principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and its offshoot Acceptance and Commitment Therapy as well as metta meditation, which is a practice involving sending kind thoughts both inward and outward.

So what might this process look like in action? As Albert's rival and his crush begin their duet and jealousy rears its ugly head, Albert begins his three-step silent meditation. He first acknowledges his negative impulses and responds first by forgiving himself for having these thoughts. Then he focuses his attention on sending kind thoughts to his rival Trey instead of silently chanting for Trey to fail. *May you play well, Trey*, Albert chants. *May you feel joy*. And here's what happens:

Something unexpected rose up from way underneath the hot magma: a tiny bubble of delight. He was shocked, but he actually felt better wishing Trey well than wishing disaster on him. He felt large instead of small. May you play well, Trey. May you feel joy . . .

It felt good. He imagined energy spilling out of him and traveling through invisible threads . . . to Trey and to Jessica. He imagined that they could feel his energy flowing into them and that it radiated out through their fingertips into their saxophones and out into the auditorium. He imagined it traveling to the ears of his nana, his mother, his sister. A smile spread across Albert's face. This was good. This was right.

This meditation not only helps Albert to feel better, it helps him to perform better when it's his turn to play, and it helps him to enjoy the entire experience.

This three-step meditation might sound too saccharine or too simplistic to some. It is positive, radically so. And it is simple in theory. But in practice, it isn't easy to acknowledge negative impulses, or to forgive ourselves for thinking negative thoughts, or to summon the good will to genuinely wish rivals well. All three of these steps require practice. Just as we teach our athletes, pianists, and dancers to practice their physical skills, and we could also teach them to practice these psychological skills.

I didn't set out to write the Star Striker series to teach this meditation. The series is not a self-help textbook. It's an adventurous, sci-fi sports story. But authors find that our own experiences have a way of seeping into the work. I'm not an athlete, but I've felt anxiety about performing as a musician. And I've learned about athletic competition through my 26-year-old son Simon Amato's experience as an athlete, trainer, and co-founder of the fitness company Life of Gains. **I know that competition can be a driver of personal growth if it's framed in a healthy way.**

Instead of responding to rivalry with the desire to tear down an opponent, we can respond with the desire to build up our own skills. “Training with or playing against athletes that are stronger can push you to work harder,” my son Simon says. “Opponents can be opportunities. I’m always grateful when I get to play a game against great athletes.”

Over the years, I have received so many letters from young readers who have let me know that a character’s experience has moved them—even transformed them. With this new series, I am hoping that Albert’s willingness to look directly at his own challenges and respond with positivity will resonate with my readers and inspire them to do the same.

Meet the author

Mary Amato is the award-winning author of over twenty-five works of fiction for children and young adults. Her latest book ***Star Striker: Game On!*** is about a 13-year-old athlete who not only deals with ordinary middle-school challenges but is also recruited by an extraordinary team of aliens to play in a high-stakes interplanetary soccer tournament. www.maryamato.com

About *Star Striker: Game On!*

Join Albert and a group of ragtag aliens as they dribble, cross, and score across the galaxy in this soccer-themed story of unlikely friendships.

The day that aliens abducted 13-year-old Albert Kinney was the day he was hoping to make the school soccer team. But that’s the way life works sometimes, especially for Albert.

Astonishingly the Zeenods, don’t want to harm Albert, they want him to play soccer. And so, Albert jumps at the chance to join the Zeenods. Yet just as he is introduced to the specifics of their game and all their high-tech gear, he faces a series of direct threats to his life. Does someone have a mysterious vendetta against Albert? Or does their first opponent, the ruthless team from Planet Tev, want to guarantee that they win?

Action-packed, yet filled with humor and heart, *Game On!* is the first book in a series that features thrilling play-by-play soccer scenes and an intergalactic plot with far-reaching consequences for the Zeenods—and Earth.

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