

The CHICKEN Doesn't SKATE

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RANGERS UPDATE: CAPTAIN ADAM LURIE REPORTING

A science fair more important than hockey?

Give me a break! In this part of Minnesota, *nothing* is bigger than hockey. If the Moose People from Neptune invaded St. Martin during a big game, they'd encounter zero resistance. Everybody would be at the rink. Only the losers would be left to fight them off—a loser being anyone around here who doesn't skate.

Of course, I'm kind of biased since I'm pretty good at hockey. So good that I'm captain of the South Middle School Rangers, even though I'm only a seventh-grader. To be totally honest, I'm officially in sixth grade, but that's only because I flunked science last year. So I had to take it again in summer school and I kind of flunked that, too. In the summer, Rollerblade hockey is very big.

The bottom line is, I'm in all grade-seven classes except science, where I'm stuck with the little sixth-grade losers — a loser being anyone who can spend five seconds in that lab without going insane from boredom.

So my ears were receiving Mrs. Baggio raving about this year's science fair, but my mind was on the ice, stickhandling, stopping on a dime in a shower of snow, streaking down on a breakaway, he shoots, he —

“Does everybody have to enter the science fair?”

That was Zachary Gustafson. *Definite* loser. King of losers. Know why he was worried about doing a project? Because all that work might interfere with his writing schedule. Rumor has it the kid churns out dozens of screenplays and mails them off to these big-time film studios, who reject them because they stink. Not that I've read any, of course. I don't even want to think about such a boring thing in such a boring class. It's like boring squared!

“Naturally, everybody will be doing a project, Zachary,” said the Bag. “But only one per grade will be entered in the fair.”

Instantly, all eyes turned to Milo Neal. Milo is the reason why this dumb science fair is front page news in St. Martin. Check out the name: Milo *Neal*. His dad is Victor Neal, the famous astronomer. His TV show *The Universe and You* is the top-rated program on the Science Channel.

Victor Neal is sort of St. Martin's claim to fame. He

grew up right here. He and Milo's mom were high school sweethearts. The whole town followed his career. Man, when he won the Nobel Prize for charting all those galaxies, this place went apewire! We even threw him a parade. You'd have thought he'd won the Stanley Cup!

That parade had been Milo's first look at his parents' hometown. He must have been about nine. It was January — eighteen below — I've never seen anybody so cold in my life! I guess that's when it hit me. Professor and Mrs. Neal were native Minnesotans, but Milo had lived in Los Angeles all his life. To him, cold meant you had to wear socks. It must have been hard for him when, two years later, his folks got divorced and he and his mom left California and came back to St. Martin to live.

So that's why the son of the most famous scientist in the country was the center of attention in the lab that day. Not only was Milo expected to go to the science fair — he was expected to ace it.

"There are no restrictions," Mrs. Baggio went on, "except it has to be science —" she looked me straight in the eye — "which means it isn't going to be about hockey."

"What about ice?" I challenged. "That's pretty scientific."

"Very well, Adam, do ice," said the teacher. "But there had better not be any skates on it. Or pucks." She

turned to the rest of the class. "Your topics must be approved by me by the end of the week."

Kelly Marie Ginsberg (loser) nudged my arm. "You're fixated on hockey."

Like that's a bad thing. "Yeah? So?"

"So a fixation could turn into an obsession," she insisted. "And that could turn into a psychosis."

I was going to give her another "Yeah? So?" but some of the gung-ho types started chiming in with their topics. Disgusted, I thought about my seventh-grade classes, where everybody played it cool.

"Bats," piped up Sheila Martel.

"Recycling," announced Kelly Marie.

"Dolphins."

"Solar energy."

A hush fell. Milo Neal had raised his hand.

"Yes, Milo?" The way the Bag almost whispered it, you'd have thought he was going to tell her where he hid the lost continent of Atlantis.

Milo pushed his Bertrand St. Rene glasses higher up on his nose. "My project will be entitled 'The Complete Life Cycle of a Link in the Food Chain.'"

Well, that must have been something good because Mrs. Baggio beamed like a lighthouse.

"That's so deep," breathed Kelly Marie. Ten to one she had no idea what he was talking about.

"Awesome!" added Zachary. Twenty to one for him.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay. I'll bite. What does it mean?"

The Bag was all over that. “Yes, Milo. What the class wants to know is the subject of your study. What link in the food chain?”

California Boy looked importantly around the classroom.

“The chicken.”