

# Time for Willy



Brian Gotta

In honor of George...the world's greatest dog.



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for  
**Willy**

## Chapter One

Sam Burnett heard the morning newspapers land, one after another, against the driveways on his cul-de-sac as he sat at his desk doing his homework. His room was dark, except for the yellow glow coming from his desk lamp and the pale early morning light leaking from the gray sky through his window curtains. He allowed himself to slip away from his studies momentarily, thinking about how many things he could figure out just by listening. For instance, he could tell that it was Monday-the day the papers weighed the least. Instead of making a low, loud “thump” and skid like most mornings, today it sounded more like a high-pitched “twap” as each newspaper hit the pavement. He could also tell that the old blue station wagon that spit the papers onto his street each day needed a tune-up, judging by the rattle coming from under the hood. And he knew the papers were late this morning. According to his digital clock it was already 5:22, and usual delivery time was around 5:10. Maybe even the paper delivery-person had trouble getting out of bed on Monday too.

Sam was tired-dog tired. He looked at his cozy bed and thought about how nice it would be to climb back in, set his alarm for 7:00, and sleep like the rest of the kids he knew. He got up to look out of his window in time to see the blue wagon make the circle back, shooting papers onto each driveway on the other side of the pitch-black street. It paused at the stop sign, put on its turn signal and drove away. No other house had a light on yet.

But Sam couldn't think about going back to bed or being tired. He just didn't have time. Even though he was

only in sixth grade, he knew he had to keep his grades up now if he wanted to get into the college prep courses at the high school, and ultimately go to Stanford. So he sat back at his desk, cleared his mind, and dug back into his math studies.

After what seemed like a long time, but was actually only a few minutes, his dog, Willy, let out a long, low groan. Sam looked down at him and smiled. Willy made the funniest noises. And whenever Sam was home, Willy was by his side. “Oh, you lucky dog,” Sam said. “No tests, no grades, no soccer practice. You just get to lay here all day and get fed and take naps. What a life!” Willy looked up at him and cocked his head to one side. Sam was pretty sure he saw a smile under his whiskers.

Sam thought about the day ahead of him. He’d study another 45 minutes until 6:30, eat breakfast, and then go on a run with Willy. At 7:15 he’d grab a quick shower, get dressed, and then walk to Seabreeze Elementary. Immediately after school it was a forty-five minute ride to the horrible practice run by Coach Rivas, then a forty-five minute drive back home. Dinner would be from 6:30-7:30, after which he’d do the dishes, get a shower, and get in bed by 8:30. He could read until 9:00 when his dad said goodnight and turned off the lights.

Sam’s dad, Mark, had already left the house for the day. His favorite saying was, “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” He was a “financial something,” which meant he had to be in the office super-early every morning. He always woke Sam up at 5:00 sharp to finish his homework or get in some extra studying. Mr. Burnett had had a paper route when he was Sam’s age and had to get up every morning at 4:30. Many times he mentioned that this experience had given him great discipline, and he wanted the same for Sam. And though there were some things Sam liked about his early mornings alone in the quiet house—the morning birds chirping out his

window and the way the sky changed colors, for instance- sometimes he just wished he could sleep a little longer.

Sam's main sport was soccer, though he played baseball, basketball, lacrosse and hockey at various times too. Sam's dad said that soon he was going to probably have to devote all of his time to soccer since that was his best sport. He said he needed to concentrate on only one to be the best he could be.

Sam played for two teams, the Breakers and the Dragons. The Breakers were more recreational, and the Dragons were a competitive, nationally ranked club team. He was a starting forward and both teams' leading goal scorer. Sam absolutely loved soccer, and believed what his father told him nearly every day, which is that if he kept working, he was good enough to get a scholarship to any college he wanted. It could even be Stanford if he maintained his grades.

Most of the kids on the Dragons were OK, though none of them were from his school. They came from all over the area, many, like him, making the 45 minute drive to practice three days each week. The kids, for the most part, were fine. The coach, though, was a different story.

Coach Rivas had played in Italy and was very "demanding." That was his word for it. The word most of the kids on the team used was "mean."

It wasn't just that Coach Rivas ran hard practices and yelled a lot-Sam could handle that. But Coach Rivas did other things the team didn't always like. If one kid ever showed up late for instance, the whole team had to quit what they were doing and run, run, run. Usually they ran until the boy who was late was in tears and everyone else was gasping for air. Sam knew how important it was for the team to all start practice on time but when your mom is driving you 45 minutes, sometimes there is going to be traffic and it's not your fault you're late. At least that's what he heard his mom say to another Dragons' mom once.

Anytime Coach thought the defense was playing weak and allowing too many shots, he made each defender take turns standing in goal while the rest of the team took shots all at once. He said that now they knew what the goalie felt like. Sam hated this “drill” because he’d seen some kids take hard kicks off the face and get hurt. Sam was always careful to shoot away from the goalie, but still kick it hard so that Coach didn’t think he was a baby.

Sam thought about practice today. He wished just once he didn’t have to go, but he would never say that to his dad. If he mentioned it to his mom she would immediately tell his dad and it would be a big issue.

Sometimes he wished he could go back to just playing for his rec team, the Breakers. The Breakers weren’t as good as the Dragons, but they had their practices and home games right at Sam’s school, and many of his friends, including his best friend, Kyle, were on the team. It had been “a big to-do” when Sam joined the Dragons. His dad had been unhappy for a long time with Coach Tyler-said he didn’t push the kids and was too nice. Actually, the word Dad used was, “soft.”

When Mr. Burnett found the Dragons he spoke with Coach Tyler and Coach Rivas about Sam doing both. Coach Tyler didn’t think it was a great idea, but said if Sam wanted more soccer that was OK with him. (Sam’s dad said that Coach Tyler was just afraid he’d eventually lose Sam from the team). Coach Rivas was enthusiastic, and said that if Sam was on another team that would only make him better. (Sam figured Coach Rivas would have agreed to anything just to get him on the team).

When he saw that the game and practice schedules didn’t conflict, Mr. Burnett immediately signed Sam up, even though Sam’s mom was against it.

“Mark,” she had said. “He’s only 11, he doesn’t need to play in national tournaments and travel to different states.”

“If he wants to play in college he’s got to be challenged,” Sam’s dad shot back. “Playing against weak

competition and scoring three goals every game won't get him any better." He was adamant. "To be the best, you have to play the best."

They had continued to argue, with his mom complaining about spending an hour and a half in the car, Sam missing out on doing fun things with his friends, the effect it might have on his school work and more. In the end though, his dad won out and Sam became a Dragon.

He looked at his clock and yawned. He was starting to wake up now that it was almost time for breakfast. For a minute Sam thought about how nice it would be if it rained today and washed out Dragons practice. But Sam knew he had to practice to get better. And it wasn't going to rain.

Willy groaned again and looked up at Sam with his "feed me" eyes. Willy knew it was nearly time for his breakfast too. "OK boy," Sam said, looking down at Willy. "Let me finish this last page and we'll both get something to eat." It was going to be another long day.

## **Chapter Two**

Sam went downstairs as quietly as possible so as not to wake up his mom, who usually slept until 6:30. It had been his job to feed Willy since they'd gotten him from the pound when Sam was just five. He was mixture of Black Lab and terrier, so his body was the color of black velvet, except for a white spot on his belly, and his face was brown. When they'd rescued him he was nearly two years old, which meant he was now about eight. They'd come up with his name when they'd first gotten him home, and his dad remarked on how smart he was. Mr. Burnett had said, "I'll bet I can teach this dog to get the paper in the morning." Sam had excitedly said, "Will he?" His parents laughed and said, "Willy!" That's his name!" Now that Sam was older, that story always embarrassed him. If he ever got a new dog, Sam had already decided, he was going to name it "Striker."

Sam opened the door from the kitchen into the garage to pour the dry kibble into Willy's bowl. Willy always waited obediently until Sam said it was OK, before digging in. Dad's car was gone and so was Dad...'at work making money to pay for the house'.

Sam was having a bowl of cereal when he heard Willy scratch at the door to come back in the house. "Come on boy, let's get the paper!" Sam said as he opened the door. Willy came flying into the house and skidded on the floor. He looked up at Sam as his whole body shook and his tail wagged. He looked like he was thinking, "Oh boy! Oh boy! I get to get the paper!"

Sam reached into the drawer and pulled out his digital watch, and set the mode to stopwatch. One Saturday,

about a year ago, his dad had decided it would be fun to time Willy in the mornings to see how fast he could bring in the paper. Willy's record time so far was 10.45 seconds, set on a Monday with a lightweight paper. Sam's dad always told him to call him at work in the event that he ever broke 10 seconds.

Willy sat on the entryway rug as Sam walked up. You could tell that every muscle was straining and that it was all he could do to not jump up and open the front door himself with his paw and run out and get the newspaper. His tail swished back and forth like windshield wiper on its highest speed.

Sam made sure the watch was set at double zero. One time he had forgotten to do that and when Willy charged into the house with the paper the clock read 21.55. Sam was almost positive that the previous day's time had been over 11.55, which meant that Willy had come back in under ten seconds. But because they weren't sure, his dad said it wasn't "official." Sam knew he would do it one day, and today, with that Monday paper, there was as good a chance as any.

"Willy...stay," Sam commanded. He opened the door. Willy's eyes darted from Sam, to the path outside, then back to Sam. This was the part Sam loved. He wasn't teasing Willy, but he loved the way the dog looked so desperate and eager to be turned loose. Sam waited and then said, "OK!"

Bang! The rug under Willy shot back three feet as he practically flew out the door and down the path. The paper was out of view, on the driveway, so Sam could only try to hear if Willy had grabbed it cleanly. If he heard it drop more than once, he knew the time wouldn't be worth looking at.

But this morning it sounded like a clean grab and sure enough, here came Willy, paper in his mouth, charging back toward the front door. As soon as he got to the threshold he dropped the bundled paper and Sam clicked the stopwatch. This might be it, he thought. He looked at the clock.

10.67.

“Shoot!” Sam said with a smile. You almost had it, boy! But that’s your second-best time ever!” Willy followed Sam into the pantry for a dog biscuit.

The only thing Willy liked better than getting the paper was his morning run with Sam. Seeing Sam lacing up his running shoes and getting a plastic grocery bag from the garage made Willy jump and run circles with excitement. Sam always waited until his mom was up so she knew they were leaving. She hadn’t been completely for the idea of Sam going out on jogs in the morning alone, but Mr. Burnett convinced her that Sam needed the extra conditioning, and that with Willy along it was safe. Her compromise was that he could run no farther than three blocks away and then had to run back by the house so that she could keep an eye on him while she read the paper and had breakfast.

Sam ran a certain course each morning, and clocked himself to see how many times he could cover it each day. He couldn’t go his fastest with Willy along, especially since he had to stop at least once during every run while Willy did his business. That’s what the plastic grocery bag was for. Sam always hoped Willy would do it as close to the house as possible so he didn’t have to run very long carrying the smelly bag. But sure enough, Willy’s favorite spot was at the turnaround point, three blocks away.

Before Sam left for school Monday morning Willy stood at his feet holding a tennis ball. Willy picked it up, dropped it; then picked it up again. Willy tossed it with his mouth so that it hit Sam in the foot. Sam laughed.

“Willy, you know I can’t play ball with you now, boy. I’ve got to go to school.”

Sam patted Willy’s head and the dog wagged his tail. Still though, Sam could tell that Willy was sad.

He said goodbye to his mom and set off for school. By now, there were lots of other kids heading up to

Seabreeze Elementary School. Sam heard a voice behind him.

“Hey, Sam! Wait up!” It was Kyle.

Sam had two best friends-Willy and Kyle Nichols, who went to his school, was in his same grade, and played for the Breakers. When Sam joined the Dragons, telling Kyle had been one of the hardest things, but Kyle understood. Kyle was a pretty “laid-back” kid, who liked to surf and fool around more than he cared about soccer. Kyle was a fair player, and could probably be really good if he wanted, but it just wasn’t that important to him. Sam sure wished Kyle were good enough to play on the Dragons so that there was someone from his school on the team. But then again, he knew even if Kyle were good enough, he would never be willing to drive that far three days a week to practice soccer.

Before Sam joined the Dragons, one of his and Kyle’s favorite things to do after school was to take the soccer ball down to the park with Willy. Willy would have a blast trying to get the ball while both boys played keep away. It took a lot of effort and skill to keep the ball moving back and forth and out of Willy’s grasp. They would always laugh when the dog would almost get the ball, then let out a frustrated growl as one of the boys kicked it away. When Kyle, Sam and Willy were all really tired they would get Willy a big, long drink out of the drinking fountain and Willy would wag his tail and look at them as if to say, “Do you want to do that again?” Sam missed those afternoons but now there just was never enough time for Willy.

“Are you ready for the Social Studies test?” Kyle asked as the boys joined up on the sidewalk.

“I hope so,” Sam replied. “I don’t think I studied enough this morning.”

“If you had a choice of never having another test, but it meant you could never play soccer again, which would you choose?” That was Kyle. He loved asking questions about things that could never happen and making you pick.

Sam let out a yawn.

“You still getting up real early every day?”

“I have to. It’s the only way I can get my stuff done.”

Kyle shook his head. “If you just played on the Breakers maybe you could get some sleep.”

Sam said, “Early to bed, early to rise...”

“Is something I would definitely despise!” interrupted Kyle.

Sam and Kyle both laughed. Sam always felt pretty good when he was around Kyle. Like maybe everything wasn’t so important and serious. The only other time he felt that way was when he was playing with Willy. Unfortunately, due to his schedule, most days there wasn’t enough time to hang around Kyle, or throw the ball to Willy.

When they arrived at school Kyle said, “See you at recess. Good luck in Social Studies.”

Sam’s good feeling walked away with Kyle. Thinking about the day ahead was like looking at dark storm clouds approaching. School, then Rivas’ soccer practice, followed by chores, and bed. He knew that it would seem like no time at all before his dad would be waking him up again tomorrow morning. Yet at the same time, it seemed like today would never end.

Early to bed, early to rise,” Sam thought. “Is something I definitely despise.”

### Chapter Three

Sam's mom picked him up from school and got on the freeway; headed towards the Dragons practice. Sam usually changed from his school clothes into his practice uniform in the backseat.

"How did your test go, buddy?" asked Wendy Burnett.

"I think I did all right," Sam answered. "I know I missed one question and I had to guess on two others. But I think I got the rest right."

"I know you're working hard, but remember, grades are more important than soccer."

"I know." Sam heard that just about every day.

Sam usually tried to study some on the way to practice, but reading while the car was moving made him a little carsick. He completed a writing assignment but still had a lot of homework left when he arrived at the field.

Sam loved soccer. He loved scoring goals, slide-tackling, and running down the open field at full speed with the ball tapped out in front of him like it was on a string attached to his foot. He loved putting his favorite move on a defender, tangling the opponent's feet and flying past him.

But as soon as he saw Coach Rivas, he got a pit in his stomach.

Coach Rivas was a small, black-haired man who looked to be about the same age as Sam's dad. Sam had played for him now six months and he'd seen him smile once. He had a strong, unusual accent and was sometimes

hard to understand. Every practice Sam worried that he might not be able to make out something the coach said and would have to ask him to say it again. Nothing made the coach madder than having to repeat himself.

As soon as he got out of the car Sam knew to begin stretching. There was no time to fool around with his teammates, kick the ball around a little and shoot the breeze. This was not the Breakers.

Most of the kids on the team were pretty nice, though Sam couldn't really call any of them his friends. Coach Rivas often said he didn't care if any of them liked each other as long as they played together.

There was one player Sam didn't like however, and that was Jackson Cole. Jackson was a big powerful kid who played opposite forward to Sam. Jackson rarely passed, took twice as many shots as anyone else on the team, and played rough. There wasn't a game that went by when he didn't get a yellow card, and the opposing coaches always complained about him to the refs.

Though there were many games when Sam had been the only player to score a goal, he couldn't remember Jackson ever congratulating him. In fact, Sam couldn't remember Jackson saying more than a dozen words to him the whole time that he'd been on the team.

The full team arrived and thankfully, no one was late so they didn't have to run more than usual to begin practice. Coach Rivas blew the whistle and said, "Ween-dows, men!" which meant the team was to hustle into a circle and do the windows drill.

Cones were lined up in a circle. Half the players went inside the circle and half went out. The players outside the circle passed a ball to someone inside so that it could be headed back. The players on the inside then quickly moved to the next person outside the cones. You would head the ball, then move, head the ball, then move. When the drill was

done right the players in the middle moved like a wheel around an axle.

After two times around the circle the coach yelled, "Switch!" and the players on the inside ran to the outside and vice-versa. In the same manner they practiced ground passes, chest traps, inside foot volleys and lace volleys. Everyone was huffing and puffing.

At one point, Timmy, a sub on the team, passed the ball to the wrong player in the middle. This caused the whole circle to break down. Coach Rivas, who never missed a single mistake, screamed, "STOP!" Everyone froze and held their breath.

"TIMMY!" he yelled. "ARE YOU BLIND? WHO WERE YOU SUPPOSED TO PASS TO?"

Timmy pointed to the player he'd missed.

"SO YOU ARE NOT STUPID. YOU *DO* KNOW WHAT TO DO. WHY THEN DID YOU PASS TO THE WRONG PLAYER? DO YOU INTENTIONALLY WANT TO RUIN THIS DRILL FOR THE TEAM?"

Timmy looked down and mumbled, "No."

"Begin again," Coach Rivas barked. The Dragons resumed the windows drill.

More than once during practice Sam wondered what Kyle was doing right now. Probably at the beach surfing or just sitting at home watching TV. Sam thought that if he were home right now he'd be throwing the ball for Willy.

After windows, they practiced one-on-one's and at one point Sam overheard Jackson speaking to Timmy.

"We better not have to run extra because of you," Jackson warned him. Timmy's face flushed and he looked away.

Next, they practiced their corner kicks, spending an especially long time since Coach Rivas said that the team was "terrible," and "the worst in the state," at corners. The last half-hour was always spent on conditioning.

This meant lining up at the end line and sprinting to the six-yard box and back, then the 18-yard box and back,

then midfield and back, then to the next 18-yard box, the next six-yard box and finally all the way to the end line and back. Sam hated this drill with a passion, though he almost always led the way.

It was not uncommon for Coach Rivas to make the team do the drill three or four times, especially if he thought someone was taking it easy. Typically there were two or three players crying at the end, and sometimes a boy might throw up.

When practice was over the Coach spoke briefly to the team, telling them he'd see them tomorrow and for no one to be late. Then he collected his cones and balls and headed across the field alone. He never parked in the parking lot next to the field where the parents were.

Sometimes Sam's mom went out and ran errands during practice, but usually since she was 45 minutes away from home she just sat in a lawn chair or in the car and read a magazine. She always seemed mad when Sam got in to go home.

"Did you have any fun at all today, Sam?" she asked as soon as the car had pulled out.

"Yeah, I love soccer," he replied.

"I know, but that practice didn't look fun to me."

"It's not supposed to be fun," Sam answered. "We're supposed to be getting better so we can go to nationals. You can't get there by having fun and fooling around at practice."

"Is that what you think, or what you've heard your dad and that coach say?" Mom asked.

"Mom, practice was fine."

"He called that one little boy stupid," she said bitterly.

"He said, 'you're *not* stupid' to him," replied Sam.

"All I know is if he ever said something like that to you, he'd be getting an earful from me."

"Mom, he's just trying to get us better."

Sam wasn't about to tell her that he hated the Dragons and Coach Rivas. That would cause too many problems at home. Plus it terrified him to think that his mom might create a big scene by yelling at Coach Rivas in front of the other kids at practice. He knew that he'd just have to hang in there and hope for it to get better. Sam and his mom didn't talk much the rest of the way home. He had the light on in the backseat trying to get some homework done. He couldn't wait to eat dinner, pet Willy and go to bed. He was so tired.