

DEAN HUGHES

The Trophy



*Would he ever make
his father happy?*



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DEAN HUGHES



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Dean Hughes is the acclaimed author of many books for young readers, including the popular Angel Park All-Stars series. He lives in Provo, Utah.

chapter 1

Danny Williams dribbled to the foul line and took a jump shot. The ball hit the front of the rim and bounced back. He grabbed the ball and fired again, but the shot was off line. He had been nervous all morning, but his poor shooting during this warm-up time was making things worse.

Danny chased down another rebound and then dribbled away from the basket. He was about to take a shot when he saw the gymnasium doors open. Perry Soderland's family walked in—the whole family, even Perry's big sisters. Danny waited until the doors closed behind them, and then he told himself to stop watching. But before he took another shot, he glanced back one more time.

Today was the first game of the season for Danny's team, the Bulldogs. The players had run some passing and lay-up drills, and now they were taking a few practice shots.

Coach Lund, in faded blue sweats and an old pair of high-top Converse shoes, was standing near the sideline. "That's it," he yelled to Alan Call. "Nice shot."

Alan was tall for a sixth grader, and fluid. He made the game look easy.

Danny was a fifth grader and much smaller than Alan. This was his first year to play on a team. He liked having an official uniform, even if it was yellow and faded. And best of all, now that he and Alan were on the same team, Alan practiced with him afternoons, after school. The two lived just down the street from each other. Danny had always looked up to Alan.

Danny took careful aim as he shot this time. He felt awkward—stiff and a little off balance—as he released the ball. But it bounced off the glass, rolled around the rim, and dropped through the net.

“Nice shot, Danny!” Coach Lund called to him. The coach was built more like a football lineman than a basketball player, with big shoulders and a short, thick neck. But he was no tough guy. His voice was soft, and he smiled most of the time, with a funny, off-centered pull to one corner of his mouth.

Danny knew that he had gotten lucky on the shot, but he was still glad that one had finally gone in.

“Okay, kids,” Coach Lund told the players, “come over here. I want to talk to you for a minute.”

Some of the players took a last shot, but soon everyone gathered around the coach. Danny looked up at his mom and his brother, Duane, who were sitting in the bleachers. A little cluster of parents made up most of the Bulldogs’ fans. Mom smiled at Danny and waved. Duane grinned.

Danny nodded at his mom and then looked away. A

movement at the far end of the gym caught his eye, and he looked toward the doors again. A man had just come in, but he turned and walked to the other side of the court. Danny told himself once again not to look anymore.

Danny's stomach felt tight. The thought of actually playing in a game frightened him. He didn't want to mess up the way he had done so often in practice. He liked to imagine himself doing something great, maybe sinking a shot that won a game. But he didn't really believe it would happen. Mostly he hoped that he wouldn't make a stupid mistake that would cause his team to lose.

But Danny could tell that Alan didn't feel that way. Nothing ever seemed to worry the guy. Right now he looked excited, even happy. He slugged the palm of his hand. "Let's *get 'em!*" he said to the other boys.

Alan was a strange-looking kid, with a narrow face and short-cut hair, and with a smile that showed not only his big front teeth but a lot of his pink gums.

"Don't go out there and just run around," Coach Lund told the team. He smiled his lopsided smile again. "Work the plays we've practiced. Take good shots. And go after the rebounds."

When the huddle broke up, Alan told Jeremy Crosland, the team's point guard, "These guys aren't any good. That tall guy—Knudsen—he's a baby. Somebody hit him with an elbow last year and he started to cry."

Alan laughed in a sudden, loud burst that stopped as quickly as it had begun. His laugh was always like

that—like a little explosion—and it usually made Danny laugh too.

Jeremy, who was the shortest kid on the team except for Danny, said, “Knudsen’s taller now. He thinks he’s a big shot.”

“A big crybaby, that’s what he is,” Alan said. “I’m going to ask him if he brought a hankie with him.”

The boys all laughed.

The referee was calling the starting teams onto the floor. Danny and the other nonstarters sat down on the lowest seat in the bleachers. But what if he didn’t play at all? Duane would call him a “bench warmer,” for sure.

Danny couldn’t resist taking one last glance at the doors, but no one was coming in now. He hadn’t checked exactly, but he knew that only about half the players’ dads had come. And when he looked across the gym, he thought the count was about the same on that side. There wasn’t really a crowd there either—just thirty or forty people scattered around.

He looked down at the glistening hardwood and thought he could smell new varnish. He wondered who painted the lines on the floor—and made them so perfect. He knew his dad could do that. Sometimes his dad painted cars. He could make them look brand-new. And he was a good mechanic. Mom said he was the best one in Ogden.

When Danny looked up, Alan was stepping into the circle in the middle of the floor. He was playing center for the Bulldogs. Tyler Johnston was the other

guard, with Jeremy. Tyler was taller than Jeremy, but chunky, and not very fast. He was a good shooter, though.

James Dunford and Perry Soderland were the forwards. James was thin and almost as tall as Alan, with legs like stilts. Perry was built strong. He was a quiet boy, but he was aggressive when he played basketball. All the starters were sixth graders, and so was Jake Moss, who was sitting next to Danny.

The other guys on the bench were fifth graders: Jeffrey Childs, Hector Reyes, and Craig Tanner.

The Roadrunners, the team the Bulldogs were playing, didn't look very good to Danny. Andrew Knudsen was tall, and so was a girl on the team, Amanda Cooper. But no one on the team could shoot like Alan.

On the tip-off Alan outjumped Knudsen, even though he was shorter, and Jeremy got the ball. He dribbled toward the basket and passed to Tyler. But Tyler had trouble finding someone to pass to, and he panicked. He let fly with a long shot.

The ball bounced off the backboard, and one of the Roadrunners leaped for the rebound. He grabbed the ball, but he didn't get control of it. It slipped from his hands and rolled out of bounds. The whistle sounded, and the referee called for the Bulldogs to take the inbounds pass.

"Come on, Tyler, work the ball in," Coach Lund was shouting. "Don't be gunning from way outside."

Danny heard his brother laughing. Duane was in

seventh grade, and he was on the junior high team. He was fairly short, like Danny, but he was built much stronger, and he had played a lot more. He made fun of Danny's league and called it "little kid" basketball.

Alan tossed the ball to James, jumped inbounds, and called for the pass. James bounced a pass back to him, and Alan, from the baseline, turned and shot.

But the ball bounced high off the iron. This time Perry got the rebound and took a short shot. But he missed too.

And that's how things went for a while.

Both teams looked nervous. They were taking wild shots and making bad passes. After a couple of minutes Alan finally got a shot to drop, however, and that seemed to calm him down. By the time the quarter was over, he had scored six points, and his team was ahead, 8 to 4.

The second quarter started even better. Alan made a foul shot, and then Jeremy stole a pass and broke away for a lay-up. The Bulldogs played good defense and got the ball back, and this time James got free for a jump shot. And he hit it.

Suddenly the Bulldogs were ahead, 13 to 4, and the other coach was calling time out. He was a little guy with a round, red face. "What do you think you're doing out there?" Danny heard him yell at his team.

And one of the fathers on the other side was yelling at his son, telling him to play tighter defense.

"Jake, go check in for Perry," Coach Lund called.

"And Danny, you, go in for Tyler."

Danny's breath caught. He stood up.

"Go get 'em, Danny!" Duane shouted from the bleachers.

Danny wasn't sure what he had to do. He stood where he was for a moment.

"Go over to the scorer's table," the coach told him. "Tell the guy who you're playing for."

Duane was laughing again. And Danny was embarrassed. He wished Duane hadn't come. But he ran to the scorer's table, checked in, and then ran back to the coach.

"Just remember what we've practiced," Coach Lund told him. He patted Danny's shoulder. "Guard that little number sixteen, and stay right on him. Don't get nervous. You'll do fine."

Danny nodded, but he was scared, even cold. His knees had begun to quiver.

"Tell the kid he's ugly," Alan whispered. "He'll probably start to cry—like Knudsen."

"He'll run home to his mama," Tyler said.

The other guys laughed. Danny tried to laugh too, but his throat was too tight.

Still, he ran onto the floor with the team, took the inbounds pass from Jeremy, and passed back immediately. Jeremy dribbled across the ten-second line. When a defender picked him up, he passed to Danny again, and Danny tried to dribble.

The little guy—number sixteen—rushed at Danny, and Danny pulled up. But he dragged his pivot foot

and the whistle blew. Danny felt his body stiffen as the referee shouted, "Number twenty-two, that's traveling."

Alan yelled, "That's okay, Danny." But Danny knew it wasn't. He had hardly gotten in the game and he had already turned the ball over to the Roadrunners.

Danny tried to make up for his mistake by playing tough defense. He stayed tight on the little guard. But the kid took a pass and dribbled hard up the floor. Danny ran with him and then reached out to knock the ball away.

The whistle sounded again.

"That's a foul on twenty-two," the ref called. "You're reaching in!"

Danny stared at the floor. He didn't want to look at his teammates—and especially not at his brother.

After that he tried, more than anything, not to make another mistake. He didn't want to get the ball, but when he did, he didn't dribble. He passed off quickly. He tried hard on defense, but he didn't cover as closely.

With Danny and Jake in the game, things really didn't go well for the Bulldogs. The Roadrunners scored six straight points, and Danny felt that was mostly his fault. After a couple of minutes, Coach Lund called time out and put his first-team players back in.

When Danny sat down, he knew what Duane was thinking. Danny hadn't done one thing right. He hadn't scored. He hadn't gotten a rebound. And he

had messed up twice. He hoped, in a way, that he wouldn't have to play any more. He would rather sit on the bench and at least have his team win.

But he also felt empty—disappointed with himself. He had wanted to do something well, something that would impress the coach, and Alan. And mostly, something he could tell his dad. He felt cold again. He wrapped his arms tight around his waist and leaned forward.

The Bulldogs played better with Perry and Tyler back in the game. And Alan began to take over. He could drive to the basket better than anyone on the floor. Even when he missed, he usually outjumped the defense and put the rebound back up.

By halftime the Bulldogs were ahead, 19 to 12. And at the end of the third quarter the score was 31 to 17. Alan was scoring most of the points for the Bulldogs.

In the fourth quarter Coach Lund made sure everyone got some playing time. He sent Danny back in the game for a couple of minutes. And Danny got off to a good start. When James reached out and deflected a pass, Danny jumped in and grabbed the ball. And then he dribbled halfway down the court before he passed off. He didn't travel or make a bad pass.

Duane was yelling, "Way to go, Danny!" and so was the coach. Danny was suddenly excited. Not long after that, he took a pass from Jeremy. As he pivoted, his defender tried to slap the ball out of his hands,

and the referee blew his whistle.

"You're on his arm, number sixteen," the referee shouted.

Danny walked to the foul line. He was nervous but excited. If he could make a foul shot, at least he could say that he had scored.

He bounced the ball a couple of times and looked at the basket. But he felt shaky. He bounced the ball again. "Put it in, Danny," Duane was yelling.

Danny lunged as he let the ball go. The shot was short and off line to the right. It didn't even hit the rim. Some kid in the stands yelled, "*Air ball!*" and the players on the Roadrunner bench picked it up.

"Air ball! Air ball!" they all chanted together.

Danny ran down the floor, forgetting what he was supposed to do. All he could hear was the yelling. He wanted to hide from it—not be out there where everyone could see him.

The next time play stopped, Coach Lund took Danny out of the game. Danny was glad. But once he sat down, he could only think what Duane would say—and what he might tell Dad.

The game got a little closer toward the end, with lots of substitutes playing. But the Bulldogs held on for the win. When the game was over, the players on both teams lined up and slapped hands with each other, and then the Bulldogs walked back to Coach Lund. He patted all of them on the back and told them what a great game they had played.

Alan's dad came down from the bleachers. He was

like Alan. He picked Alan right up off the ground and hugged him. "Great game!" he said.

He set Alan down, and then he began congratulating all the other boys. He was the Mormon bishop in the neighborhood. Most of the kids on the team were Mormons, so they knew him well.

Alan's mom hugged Alan too. She was tall too, and thin, like Alan. "Good game," Danny heard her say, "but you ought to pass the ball to the other boys more often."

"Why? I'm the best shooter," Alan said.

"Don't brag," she told him.

"Hey, I'm just being honest. You always say to tell the truth." He broke into one of his little explosions of laughter.

Danny didn't care if Alan bragged. He *was* the best shooter on the team—the best *everything*.

"Danny, nice job," Mr. Call said, and he patted Danny on the top of his head, softly, with his big hand. His smile was like Alan's, his gums showing.

"I got called for traveling that one time," Danny said.

"Ah, well, don't worry about that. That happens to everybody—and you're just learning."

Danny's mom had come up behind Danny. "That's right," she said, and she put her arm around him. "You did a good job."

But in the car, on the way home, Duane said, "Hey, what kind of a foul shot was that? Can't you get the ball to the basket?"