



## ***BEING A CHAMPION***

The old gym was empty and dimly lit, much like the mood of the player who made her way across the wooden floor, past her team's bench, toward the exit door. She walked slowly, dejectedly, thinking about her team's loss...wondering how she could have failed. Upon nearing the door, she recognized a tall well-dressed, middle-aged man sitting on a nearby bleacher. She had seen the man before, in attendance at some of her other volleyball games, but the two had never met. She wondered why this man was still sitting in the gym, and what he might be waiting for.

The unhappy player was heading for the door when the man stopped her with a question. "Why is your head so low to the ground?"

"You must have missed the game," said the young player, sadly, "otherwise you would have known we lost the championship." She had spent the previous four years alternately dreaming and practicing for this night, and the disappointment of the loss was overwhelming.

"Well, I saw the game, but I didn't see you lose a championship," the man replied.

"I'm not sure what you mean," the player said, perplexed.

The tall man rose from the bleacher and moved closer to the disheartened player.

"Tonight I had the pleasure of watching you very closely. I noticed how you took time before the game to help the team manager carry the water cooler. It was then that you were a champion – a champion of kindness. I saw during the game when you had an opportunity for a kill, but instead set the ball to another teammate for the easy point. It was then you were a champion of unselfishness. I also observed you when the team fell behind in score, and your teammates began to lose faith in themselves; you patted them on the back and encouraged them with your words. It was then you were a champion of spirit. I watched you as you gave every ounce of energy you had, and never once gave up. It was then that you were a champion of determination. And I witnessed at the end of the game, your heart-felt congratulations to the winners. It was then you were a champion of sportsmanship." The man paused for a moment, looking at the player standing silently before him.

He continued, "This evening I saw you demonstrate the qualities that will win you respect and friendship, qualities that will provide you with many moments more meaningful than you might get from any single game, championship or not. You were a champion when you walked into the gym tonight. So lift your head up when you walk through that door over there; a player like you will always be a champion."