

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Upswing

By T.J. Resler  
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*T.J. Resler is an American author with a passion for telling stories. A former journalist, professor and research analyst, she researches and writes a wide variety of nonfiction and fiction for kids and adults. In this short story, a star baseball player struggles to come to terms with his high school's new rating app. In baseball, a batter hits a ball that the other team's pitcher throws in order to try to get on first, second, or third base or to get 'runs' — points earned for each player that crosses home plate. If a batter gets three "strikes" (missing three good pitches), they are out. The batting team only gets three outs and then they take the field. As you read, make note of the details that support A.J.'s and his coach's view of Rateez.*

[1] Two outs, man on second.

Time to put some runs on the board. A.J. grabbed his bat, a pockmarked old maple Louisville Slugger<sup>1</sup> that Coach had bequeathed<sup>2</sup> him when he joined the team freshman year, and strode toward the batter's box. He'd drive in a run for sure, maybe even knock it out of the park for two. The Hawks pitcher had good stuff — blistering fastballs and wicked curveballs<sup>3</sup> — but not good enough to get A.J. out.

But, then again, as it turned out, today they didn't need to.

"A.J., take a seat." Coach Carson waved him back to the bench. "Jaylen, you're up. Come on, let's see some hustle."



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[5] "Coach, Marquis just went," A.J. said. "It's my spot."

That was how it'd been all season: A.J. batted fourth, the cleanup spot,<sup>4</sup> following Ryan at leadoff,<sup>5</sup> then Luis and Marquis. If they got on base — as Ryan just had with a hard-hit grounder past the shortstop — A.J. could be counted on to drive them home. He was often the reason why the Panthers decimated<sup>6</sup> their opponents.

1. a brand of baseball bats
2. **Bequeath (verb)** to pass something on to someone else
3. fastballs and curveballs are two different types of pitches
4. The fourth player in the batting order is known as the cleanup hitter, also known as the cleanup spot. This is almost always one of the best hitters on the team with the most power and ability to drive in runs with extra-base hits (double, triple, or home run).
5. the first hitter in any inning

Coach Carson turned toward A.J. but only met his eyes for a moment before looking away. “Change in batting order. Check the sheet.”

A.J. grabbed the clipboard hanging on the dugout fence, traced his finger down the column of player names, and found himself in Jaylen’s old spot. Seventh! A.J. had never batted bottom of the order. It’d take a miracle for him to bat this inning.<sup>7</sup> He yanked off his batting gloves and helmet, shoved his bat back into his bag, and threw himself down on the bench, where he proceeded to grind his cleats into the dirt.

Luis sat down near him and offered his bag of sunflower seeds. A.J. shoved a handful in his mouth and crunched with fury. “Thanks,” he said. “Can’t believe Coach switched Jaylen and me.” He spat out a shell. “Dang ratings.”

“Nothing you can do about that now,” Luis replied. “Just play your game.”

- [10] Jaylen tapped his bat on home plate while shimmying his hips and set up, ready for the pitch. The Hawks pitcher wound up and delivered a fastball, right over the plate. Jaylen swung hard — too high — and didn’t stop, letting his momentum twirl him around like some prima ballerina on her tippy-toes. The fans in the stands, mainly family and friends, whooped and clapped, then pulled out their phones. A.J. heard a series of chimes, *ding-ding-ding*, on Coach’s phone. Coach tapped his Rateez app and smiled.

The next pitch was high and outside, but Jaylen swung anyway, skying it straight up like a rocket blasting into space. The catcher ripped off his mask, held his mitt out, and let the ball drop into it, an easy end to the inning and a lousy start to the game. Hawks 1, Panthers 0. Jaylen twirled his bat, turned toward the stands, and swept his arm out in a theatrical bow. The audience roared. *Ding-ding-ding*.

It was the Hawks turn to field. Jaylen trotted back to the dugout, tossed his batting gear down, and grabbed his glove. A.J. ran out with him. “Jaylen, stop flexing. You got out.” Jaylen shrugged and tipped his cap toward the stands like he was an MLB All-Star who just hit a grand slam, eliciting<sup>8</sup> even more cheers.

A.J. settled into his position at third. The Hawks batter swung at the first pitch and smacked a hard hopper straight toward third. A.J. leapt to his right, snagged it, and hurled the ball to first just in time for the out. A smattering of applause rippled through the stands — not as much as Jaylen had gotten for his lousy at-bat, but no matter. A.J. had made the play; the first batter was gone.

The Panthers pitcher struck out the next batter and got two strikes on the third. The next pitch was a fastball, but the batter got to it, popping it up to center field — straight to Jaylen, who only had to step back five feet to get under it, an easy catch for any outfielder. But as soon as the ball hit Jaylen’s glove, he tossed it up and juggled it with his other hand before trapping it against his body as he somersaulted on the turf. The fans cheered, clapping and pounding the metal bleachers with their feet.

- [15] A.J. shook his head and looked over at the dugout, where Coach Carson gave a whoop, waved his phone at

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6. **Decimate** (*verb*) to destroy

7. a single turn at bat for a team until three outs are made

8. **Elicit** (*verb*) to draw a reaction out from someone

Jaylen and thrust his thumb up. He had a big grin on his face. *Since when did Coach check Rateez after every play?*

Parks High had adopted Rateez the previous year to give students more voice in school decisions, like which lunch vendor to use, what kind of music the DJ should play at the homecoming dance, or how much booster money<sup>9</sup> should go to the various clubs. A.J. honestly hadn't seen the point of it all, but the Parks High administration touted<sup>10</sup> the innovation as a reflection of its success in "whole-person, student-centered education" — whatever that meant — and it became a model for the entire D.C. school system. It wasn't long before the students took it further. But baseball...It made A.J. sick to see people rating the plays. Baseball was his life. He loved playing the game. Plus, it was his ticket to college — at least now that Ms. Nazari, his former teacher, was gone. But Rateez was taking it all away from him. He watched Jaylen as he chased an errant<sup>11</sup> ball, cartwheeling just before he got to it. The crowd roared. A.J. sighed.

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A.J. lingered after the game. "Coach, got a sec?"

"What is it, A.J.?"

"The change in batting order, with me hitting seventh." A.J. twisted his cleat into the ground. "I mean, I only got three at-bats, and we lost." He pointed to the scoreboard: Hawks 6, Panthers 4.

[20] "A.J., you're a great ballplayer. No one disputes that. But...that's not the only thing that counts now." Coach Carson held up his phone with the Rateez app prominently displayed on his screen.

"The crowd loves Jaylen," Coach said. "He's a solid 8 now and still climbing."

"But he's not even batting .200."<sup>12</sup>

"Doesn't matter. The fans love his antics. He's a top performer — even when he strikes out." Coach Carson put his hand on A.J.'s shoulder. "You might want to take a play from his book. It helps, believe me."

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The next morning in history class, A.J. leaned over to Marquis's desk. "Marquis, watcha got on Rateez?"

[25] Marquis looked up from his phone. "Why?"

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9. fundraising

10. **Tout (verb)** an attempt to sell something or persuade people of the benefits or qualities of something

11. **Errant (adjective)** stray or off-course

12. This is a batting average of 200, calculated by dividing a player's hits by the number of times they are at-bat. The number is reported as a decimal between 0 and 1 and read without the decimal. An average batting average is .250 while anything over .300 is considered excellent and over .400 is considered to be unachievable.

"Coach said Jaylen got 8 points or something."

"Yeah, good for Jaylen."

Mr. Bickerton, their new teacher, was passing out study packets. A.J. waited for him to walk by their desks. He had replaced Ms. Nazari when she suddenly left the school during winter break. He never got mad when students talked to each other during class — even in the middle of a lesson. It made A.J. crazy.

"But that's how he's batting cleanup," A.J. said.

[30] "Yeah? Salty much?"

"Nah," A.J. shifted in his chair. "Just don't get it, that's all. He's not that good a ballplayer."

"What's there to get? What's your rating?"

A.J. shrugged. "The app's lame. I don't check it."

Marquis raised his right eyebrow. "A.J.," he said, everyone checks Rateez. Not like you got a choice if you want to make it."

[35] "Make it at what?"

"Dude! Everything. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

A.J. dug his phone out of his jeans pocket and searched for the app. He loaded it and scrolled through, found Jaylen with his 8.3 stars — still rising — and then himself: 6.4. The app's trendline showed him down a whole point from a month ago. He kept scrolling. Marquis was holding steady around 7.2, and Coach Carson had just gained half a star, probably from putting the ever-popular Jaylen higher in the batting order.

A.J. exhaled, like someone had punched him in the stomach. "Dang, Coach changed the batting order based on ratings."

"You just now figuring that out? Wake up, man. Get your head out of your books."

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[40] A.J. arrived early to practice that afternoon. He went into the batting cage and loaded the pitching machine with a bucket of balls. He always tried to find some time to himself — whether hitting balls or hitting the books — but today, especially, he needed to clear his head, forget about Jaylen replacing him in the batting order, forget about that lame app and his falling rating. He lost himself in the rhythm of machine and batter — *fwip-CRACK*, *fwip-CRACK*, *fwip-CRACK* — as he worked to perfect his swing. A lot of hitting coaches told batters to make contact when their swing was still on a downward path, so it'd create back-spin and loft the ball higher, but A.J. knew better. He leveled off his swing and made contact on a slight upswing: the key to success.

Or so he thought.

A.J. dropped his bat and let a pitch fly by. *Fwip*. He had to take back his old spot in the batting order, reclaim his

star status. Get noticed. But how could he move back up to the cleanup spot? He pounded the yellowed rubber home plate into the dirt but didn't swing at the next pitch. It wasn't about perfecting his swing. It was about pleasing the fans, and a great play wasn't enough to do that. He watched the last few pitches fly by, leaned back against the fence and examined his bat, as if somewhere hidden in the wood grain he'd find the answer to this dilemma.

*Alright, they want a show? They'll get a show.* A.J. swung his bat back and forth, then twirled it like an airplane propeller and set up before taking a few swings. *Nah, that wouldn't be enough.* He flicked his bat into the air and...watched it drop to the ground. He nudged a toe under it and flipped it up — too far away to catch. This wasn't going to be easy, but easy wasn't A.J.'s thing. He picked up his bat and tried again.

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By Saturday, when the Panthers played their next game, A.J. could handle his bat like a karate master wielded nunchakus,<sup>13</sup> spinning it in front of him, twirling it around his back and under his arms and legs, and flipping it into the air and catching it without fail — well, most of the time anyway. His bruised forearms and shins bore testimony to the numerous failures he endured during his daily practice sessions. Now it was time to perform his bat tricks for the fans in the stands, submitting his newfound skills for their judgment, to see if he was spectacular enough to reclaim his coveted spot in the batting order. As he waited for his turn to bat, his breaths came fast and his heart pounded, rocking his entire body — not the rush of adrenaline A.J. usually felt when he batted, but more like those first at-bats when he was a six-year-old Little Leaguer and didn't know if he'd even come close to hitting the ball off the tee.<sup>14</sup>

[45] The announcer's voice boomed out over the loudspeakers. "And now, batting in the seventh spot: Number 3, Andre Johnson!"

As he walked up to home plate, A.J. ran his hand up and down his bat's barrel, an unspoken prayer that his instrument of salvation would not fail him. He entered the batter's box, twisted his cleats into the dirt, and flipped his bat up in the air, achieving a complete 360-degree rotation before catching it with his right hand. He held it up like a trophy before the fans, eliciting an amount of applause that could best be described as polite, but hardly enthusiastic, hardly enough to boost his ratings on Rateez. He swung at the first pitch and missed. A.J. needed to up his game. He took a deep breath, kissed the barrel of his bat, and then launched it high into the air, higher than he had practiced, higher than anyone could reasonably catch. The bat corkscrewed through the air, sunlight dancing along its golden maple barrel as it arced back to earth, its handle returning to his palm with a satisfying smack. The fans erupted in a cacophony<sup>15</sup> of whoops, praise and shouts, clapping and pounding their feet on the metal bleachers. But even over the ruckus, A.J. listened for the one affirmation he truly sought: Coach's phone chiming. And there it was: *ding-ding-ding*. He tipped his cap toward the stands, twirled his bat and got ready to swing again. *Ding-ding-ding*.

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13. a traditional Okinawan martial arts weapon consisting of two sticks connected at one end by a short chain or rope
  14. a mount that holds the ball in place for young athletes to hit
  15. **Cacophony** (*noun*) a harsh mixture of sound

Admiration trailed A.J. through the school hallways now. He swaggered down the hall, acknowledging classmates with a nod or “Hey,” feeling the buzz of his phone in his jeans pocket as the Rateez app tallied<sup>16</sup> his return to glory. He entered the history classroom and nodded toward Mr. Bickerton, who gave him a strong pat on the back as he walked by.

“Yo, that bat-flipping thing is fire,” Marquis said. “How you do that?”

“Check it out,” A.J. said, shoving his phone in front of Marquis. In just one week, A.J.’s rating on Rateez had climbed to 7.6 stars. “Coach said he’d put me back in the cleanup spot next game.”

- [50] “Alright,” Marquis nodded. “It’ll be good to have you batting behind me again. I mean, I’ll be smacking dingers.<sup>17</sup> But in case I just get a triple,<sup>18</sup> you can hit me home.”

A.J. snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“You going to show me how to do those bat tricks?”

Marquis was holding steady in the low 7s, thanks to his popularity — he picked up lots of stars from girls — and his own signature move on the ball field, which combined some fancy footwork, an elaborate sequence of tapping his bat on home plate and staring down the barrel of his bat at the pitcher like he was sighting down a rifle. He didn’t need any boost, and A.J. didn’t want to give away any of his secrets, even to his best friend. “You better stick with your dainty<sup>19</sup> dance moves,” A.J. said, mustering his best smirk<sup>20</sup> and wiggling his hips in his seat to mock his friend. “It takes an actual athlete to flip a bat.”

Marquis rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

- [55] “Nice job, Marquis!” Mr. Bickerton said as he handed back the test they had taken the week before.

“Nice job, A.J.!”

Marquis waved his returned test in front of A.J.’s face. “Yo, A.J., check it out. You’re not the only one who gets As.”

A.J. snatched Marquis’s test out of his hands. “Must be some mistake.”

“Nah, just my natural brilliance shining through.”

- [60] A.J. looked at the big red A- scribbled at the top of the page, shook his head, and started to hand it back, but

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16. **Tally** (*noun*) a record of a score or amount

17. another name for a home-run in baseball - when a batter hits the ball and is able to run around all the bases and back to home plate before the other team is able to get an out or make a play

18. when a batter hits the ball and is able to run to third base before the other team can make a play

19. **Dainty** (*adjective*) delicate

20. **Smirk** (*verb*) to smile in a smug or conceited way

then he stopped to compare the answers to his own test. Both As, but nothing alike. For a question about the Cold War<sup>21</sup> Marquis had rambled on and on about the Space Race<sup>22</sup> and didn't even mention communism, the Iron Curtain<sup>23</sup> or Mutually Assured Destruction<sup>24</sup> — pretty big omissions, from what A.J. could tell, and he couldn't figure out how such a lame answer could earn an A-minus. Unless...

A.J. wasn't the type to sneak looks at classmates' grades — wasn't his business and he didn't really care anyway — but he glanced around the classroom now and couldn't believe what he saw: all the students looking smug, all holding tests with good grades. Nothing lower than a B+.

He craned his neck to check out the first seat in his row, so he could catch Ayana's reaction; she was the class genius, but she was absent.

"Hey, what's up with Ayana? She's been gone all week."

"All week?" Marquis said. "Man, she was down-voted to the unpopulars' class last month. You just now noticing?"

[65] "Down-voted? But she's smart and, you know, nice enough."

"Don't matter. Score got down to, like, 3." Marquis shrugged. "Class decided she don't belong here, I guess."

Mr. Bickerton finished passing back the tests. "How about those grades!" he said. "Kudos to you all. You should be really proud of all your hard work. To celebrate, I've brought in cupcakes — home-made!" He reached under his desk and pulled out a couple of big plastic containers and a pile of napkins. "Come on up."

A.J. hung back while his classmates rushed Mr. Bickerton's desk to pick out their prizes. He took whatever was left (looked like carrot cake) and returned to his desk, leaning back in his chair and listening to chatter, then delighted lip-smacking, and finally the *ding-ding-ding* of the Rateez app. A.J. scrolled through the app and watched Mr. Bickerton's rating climb nearly half a point in the time it took a teen to eat a cupcake.

"He's a really good teacher," Marquis said and licked some frosting off a finger before tapping 8 stars on Rateez. "Ms. Nazari never did this."

[70] Ms. Nazari, who had taught history at Parks High for years, until this semester, didn't pass out cupcakes — or easy A's. She pushed her students hard, especially A.J. The other teachers had stereotyped A.J. as a jock<sup>25</sup> who

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21. The Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union lasted for decades and resulted in anti-communist suspicions and international incidents that led the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war.
  22. The Space Race is the term used to describe the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States between 1955 and 1975, with both nations competing in trying to explore space.
  23. The Iron Curtain was the term used to describe the political boundary that separated the Soviet Union from the West until the Cold War ended in 1991.
  24. Mutually Assured Destruction is a term given to the idea that both the attacker and defender would be destroyed as a result of nuclear war.
  25. a name given to stereotype of an athlete who has little to no interest or ability in any area other than the sport they play

didn't care about his grades as long as he remained eligible to play, but not Ms. Nazari. On the first history test of the year, she wrote that his answer on compromises inherent<sup>26</sup> in the U.S. Constitution demonstrated "penetrating insight" and said she'd help him develop it into a full-fledged essay that he could submit to colleges and maybe even earn a scholarship — an academic scholarship. But now she was gone, replaced over winter break by Mr. Bickerton, who let kids cut up<sup>27</sup> during class, handed out A's like they were participation trophies, and topped it all off with home-baked treats. But, hey, he had great ratings on Rateez. What else mattered?

"You eating this?" Marquis asked, reaching for A.J.'s cupcake.

"Nah, man," he replied. "I lost my appetite."

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At practice the following Monday, A.J. stared at the scoreboard and choked back the bile<sup>28</sup> threatening to spew from his mouth. The top line of the scoreboard — which was supposed to list the jersey number of the batter, followed by the number of balls and strikes against him and the total outs in the inning — now included a new statistic: the batter's Rateez score. On the bottom line of the scoreboard, after the usual inning score, total runs, hits and errors, was a box for the entire team's Rateez average. A.J. didn't know what was worse: that his real-time Rateez score was going to be displayed on the big board for everyone to see and compare to the other players, that the players' ratings were going to be averaged to create a team rating, or that the Rateez fervor<sup>29</sup> had already engulfed the entire community. The pressure was on. A.J. needed to excel not only for his own benefit but to drive up the Panthers team rating. Oh, and get hits, field<sup>30</sup> anything that came his way, and help win the game.

Marquis walked up and stood next to him and let out a low whistle. "Alright, game on, I guess."

[75] "What's this even mean?" A.J. asked. "Who wins: the team with the highest score or the highest rating?"

Marquis shrugged. "Come on, let's warm up." He threw a ball to A.J.

Coach Carson called the players in to circle up. "A few of you noticed the change on the scoreboard," Coach said, unleashing a barrage<sup>31</sup> of questions and comments from the players. "Quiet! Here's the bottom line: We're getting rated for our performance — the whole team. The fans want more, and if we don't give it to them, we're getting cut."

"What do you mean, Coach?" Luis asked. "Cut?"

"Cut, as in cut. The school system is using Rateez to make budget cuts at each school. If we get high ratings, we

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26. **Inherent (adjective)** existing in something as an essential piece

27. misbehave

28. Bile is a fluid in the stomach that aids in digestion that is sometimes vomited but is also used to describe someone's anger.

29. **Fervor (noun)** intense passion

30. catch

31. **Barrage (noun)** an attack over a wide area



get funded. If we get low ratings...well, they'll replace baseball with something more amusing, something trending higher on Rateez. Acrobatics or something."

- [80] Silence settled over the team, with some players searching Coach's face to see if this was all some big joke and others staring at the ground, plucking blades of grass from the turf. A.J.'s chest tightened as he saw his future disappear before his eyes. He'd given up hopes for an academic college scholarship after Ms. Nazari left — probably down-voted out of the school — and now he might lose baseball.

"What we got to do, Coach?" Marquis asked.

"Entertain the crowd. Attract more fans."

"But how?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know, build on your strengths. What do you do that makes the fans love you? Take that to the next level. More clowning around, Jaylen. Ryan, more steals — and make them, I don't know, dramatic or something. Marquis, get more intimidating and not just when you face a pitcher. Whatever, guys, it's just got to be more than wiggling your butt when you go up to bat."

- [85] Luis slapped Jaylen on the arm with his glove. "That's your best move, Jay-bird."

"Look," Coach continued, "Jaylen, Marquis and A.J. have this figured out — A.J. even turned around a bad start to his season and is on an upswing now — so talk to them. We're taking this week's practices to work on this. Forget the skills drills. Figure out your moves, and we'll put them to the test during our scrimmage<sup>32</sup> today. Go on, get out there. Jaylen, Marquis, A.J.: you three go help your teammates."

The players fanned out across the field, but A.J. hung back for a moment. "Coach, if baseball's cut, what you going to do?"

Coach's jaw clenched. "You just worry about yourself and your team, A.J."

A.J. scanned the field and saw Marquis working with a couple of players in the batting cage and Jaylen juggling some balls with the pitchers, so he ran to the outfield, where a few players were practicing jump throws and somersaults.

- [90] "Hey, looks good, but you can't all do the same thing," A.J. said. "Maybe try one of those — what do you call them? — cartwheels or a flip or something."

"I can do the splits," Ryan said, sliding down onto the ground with his legs spread so wide that A.J. cringed. "OK, work on that and maybe combine it with some fancy jumps and stuff. Luis, your somersault looks good; can you do a flip?"

Luis shrugged. "Never tried."

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32. a practice game

"I think it's just like a somersault in the air," A.J. said. He took off his cap and ran a hand through his hair; he wasn't used to being an instructor. "Maybe first see how high you can jump — just jump high and tuck your knees up tight." Luis ran a few steps and leaped high in the air, his arms stretched straight up like he was Superman flying off into the sky, then he pulled his knees up and hugged them to his chest before straightening out and landing.

"Alright, alright!" A.J. said with a grin. "Now try it by flipping yourself forward like a somersault. Ryan, come here and help me spot him." By the end of practice, Luis had mastered the flip, and he showed off his skills during the scrimmage at the end of practice, earning cheers from his teammates.

[95] Coach seemed to relax a little.

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When the Panthers took to the field for Saturday's game, they wasted no time before showing off their new tricks: wild jumps with splits, somersaults, ball juggling, new bat tricks — all topped off with Luis's spectacular flip.

"How about our Parks High Panthers!" the announcer shouted, barely audible above the fans cheering and banging on the bleachers.

Word spread through the school and then all of Washington about the Panthers' antics, and the crowd grew from week to week until the bleachers overflowed and it was standing-room only. The team's rating skyrocketed to an unheard-of 8.7 stars, though their record dropped to 8 wins and 5 losses. A.J.'s batting average dropped below .300 for the first time in his high-school career, but it was a small price to pay for his team's success and his personal rating of 9.2. His bat tricks were a highlight of the game.

When their archrivals,<sup>33</sup> the Hawks, returned to Parks High for a rematch, the Panthers were ready for them. Their pitcher juggled three balls while running out to the mound, where he stopped and bounced a ball off his bicep before tossing the extras back to the ump.<sup>34</sup> He wound up and hurled a fastball, ending his throw with a roundhouse kick off the mound. It was a strike, not that the crowd really cared. When the Hawks batter hit a fly out to right field, Ryan leapt high into the air to snag it, then twirled and kicked out his legs mid-air before landing on the turf in a wide split. Jaylen caught a flyball in his cap, then slapped it back on his head, much to the amusement of the fans. Marquis planted himself in front of first base and dared the batter to try to get past him.

[100] At the bottom of the inning, behind two runs, the Panthers prepared to bat, with Ryan getting a leadoff single. He took a large lead off first base, taunting the pitcher to try to pick him off and diving back before every attempt. During the next pitch, he sprinted toward second, intending to steal the base, but the Hawks catcher was too quick with his throw to second. Ryan stopped in his tracks and headed back to first, but the first and second basemen tossed the ball between them, closing in on him to tag him out. Ryan was trapped in a pickle, and the fans were loving every moment of it. Ryan stopped, crossed his arms, faked a big yawn and tapped his

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33. **Archrival** (*noun*) main rival or opponent

34. short for umpire, the official who calls the game

foot impatiently. The second basemen lunged toward him with the ball. Ryan twirled to the side, sprinted into the outfield, and waved bye-bye to the Hawks players, who proceeded to chase him around the outfield. The ump kept screaming, "Out!" but nobody paid any attention to him. The players' phones lit up — *ding-ding-ding* — and the scoreboard displayed an 8.9. The next Panther popped out, and then Marquis followed with a blooper<sup>35</sup> to first base. It would have been an easy out, except Marquis let out a primal scream and hurled himself toward the first baseman, who stopped dead in his tracks, a deer-in-the-headlights look on his face, and dropped the ball. Marquis was safe.

A.J. strode over to the batter's box, bounced his bat off home plate and caught it behind his back. He took a couple practice swings, then did his best nunchaku moves before setting up and smacking a fastball over the fence — his first homer in four games. 9 stars! Not only were the Panthers entertaining the fans, they'd just tied the game. A.J. hadn't felt this good about a game in a long time. Luis followed him with a line drive<sup>36</sup> to deep right field for a double. When the next Panther batter hit a high fly to center, Luis sprinted for home. But the Hawks center fielder threw a rocket home, where the catcher waited with his mitt outstretched. The ball smacked into the leather, and the catcher swung his arm low and to the left, directly in Luis's path. No slide would get past that tag, so Luis launched himself into the air, flipping himself forward toward home plate. But he didn't tuck his knees in time to get the rotation he needed, and he came down head first onto home plate. The ump screamed, "Safe!" and the fans jumped to their feet cheering. *Ding-ding-ding*. 9.5 stars!

The team waited, a tip of the cap or a theatrical bow might get them even higher ratings.

But Luis didn't get up.

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The next weekend, as A.J. walked up to the batter's box, he thought about Luis again. He had thought all week about what had happened. About him encouraging Luis to flip. And now Luis lay in a hospital bed with a metal "halo"<sup>37</sup> bolted into his skull. It was attached to keep his head immobile as his broken neck healed. The entire team had gone to visit him. A.J. had promised Luis a performance.

[105] "This is for you, brother," A.J. whispered as he set himself for the first pitch.

"Hey, Johnson, let's see some flips!" a fan shouted from the stands.

"Yeah, come on, A.J., twirl it!"

A.J. twisted his cleats into the dirt, settled deeper into his batting stance, and took a deep breath. He swung at the first pitch, missed, and set up again.

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35. a ball hit high but outside the infield

36. a ball hit by a batter in a straight line, usually low to the ground

37. A halo is a medical device used to stabilize the cervical spine after traumatic injuries to the neck. It consists of a halo vest, stabilization bars, and a metal ring that circles the patient's head and is attached to the skull with multiple pins.

"You can't hit unless you flip it first," a fan called out. Others laughed.

[110] A.J. took a ball,<sup>38</sup> stepped out of the batter's box and back in, and got set for the next pitch.

"Come on, A.J., let's see your stuff!"

"Can't win without a spin!"

A.J.'s blood pounded in his ears, and his breaths came quick and shallow. He tried to tune out the heckling. The next pitch flew past him.

The crowd's jeers grew louder. "You trying for a 2 rating?"

[115] Someone threw a soda can toward home plate. A.J. dodged it, kicked it out of the way, and got back into the batter's box.

"A.J., think about what you're doing!" Coach's voice rose above the din.<sup>39</sup> A.J. nodded. That's all he was doing: thinking. Thinking about the game, about Rateez, about his chances for a college scholarship. About Luis.

"Just play your game, A.J." he whispered.

The next pitch was a fastball, and A.J. made solid contact, driving it deep into left field. He sprinted toward first, rounded the bag and raced toward second, his cleats tearing up the dirt under him. He dove toward second base, sliding face-first in a cloud of dust until his outreached arm reached the corner of the bag, a split second before the ball arrived.

"Safe!" the ump called. A.J. popped up and brushed dirt off his uniform.

[120] There was a collective quiet as the fans in the stands looked at each other for a moment. Then they began to boo and get out their phones.

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38. a pitch that is not a strike that the batter does not swing at

39. **Din** (*noun*) a loud, unpleasant and ongoing noise

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the theme of the story?
  - A. Don't lose sight of what you believe in just to please others.
  - B. Teenagers shouldn't try new things just to impress others.
  - C. Technology has no place within high school sports.
  - D. There is more to life than high school sports.
  
2. What is the cause of the conflict between A.J. and Coach Carson?
  - A. A.J. is not performing as well as he once had.
  - B. Coach Carson believes that Jaylen is a better play than A.J..
  - C. A.J. thinks Coach Carson is trying to help Jaylen get a scholarship and not him.
  - D. Coach Carson wants A.J. to entertain the crowd rather than perform well in baseball.
  
3. What is the main reason the author includes Marquis as a character in the story?
  - A. Marquis helps A.J. to see the bad side of focusing on the Rateez app ratings at school.
  - B. Marquis is a person for A.J. to share his thoughts with so the reader knows what they are.
  - C. Marquis voices the thoughts of their classmates and teachers on the importance of Rateez.
  - D. Marquis makes A.J. question his loyalty to baseball against his desire for a baseball scholarship.
  
4. How does Luis' fall affect A.J.?
  - A. A.J. is completely unaffected by the fall.
  - B. A.J. decides to abandon Rateez after the fall.
  - C. A.J. is encouraged by the ratings Luis gained from the fall.
  - D. A.J. still performs for the crowd but is nervous because of the fall.
  
5. In the story, how are Coach Carson's and A.J.'s points of view different? Use details from the story to support your answer.

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the story, even though he doesn't believe in Rateez, A.J. fears losing his chances at a scholarship if he doesn't improve his ratings. How does fear drive action? Have you ever done something you didn't want to do because you were afraid of the consequences?
2. In the story, many people around A.J. change how they behave in order to improve their ratings on Rateez, even adults. Why do people follow the crowd? Have you ever seen people around you follow a trend you thought was silly? How did you deal with this experience?
3. In the story, A.J.'s school uses the Rateez app to alter classes and make budget decisions. What are the costs and benefits of technology? Do you think there are any benefits to something like Rateez? Can you think of any other possible costs and benefits to using Rateez in a school that weren't discussed in the story?
4. In the story, A.J. notices his teacher acting strangely and finds out one of the smartest students was moved to a different class, based on low Rateez ratings. What are some of the positive and negative effects of social status? What are the things you do to help maintain your social status? Why are they important to you?