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Fiction

# Three Swings

Coach Williams had a problem, and the problem was named Billy. He was shy and small for his age. Thin as the yellow foul pole. His crisp, white uniform hung on him like he was a hanger in the closet. The only time Billy got dirty was when he tripped and fell running toward right field between innings. The only possible blister he could have was from sitting on the bench.

*by* CHRIS FABRY

**W**HEN BILLY STEPPED TO THE PLATE, he held the bat to his shoulder like there was a magnet inside. It never moved. He might as well have held a shovel or a yardstick up there, because he never took a swing, and that's what bugged Coach Williams the most.

"Come on, Billy!" his coach yelled, clapping and pacing. "Put that bat in the strike zone!"

At this point in the season, with three games left and no hope for the playoffs, Coach Williams decided to focus on an achievable goal. So far, Billy had experienced three outcomes to each at-bat. He had struck out looking, walked, and on four occasions, had been hit by a pitch. He had scored a run three times, even though he ran the bases like a frog searching for a lily pad.

The one thing Billy hadn't done all season was swing, and Coach Williams knew he had to figure out some way to get that bat off Billy's shoulder just once before the season ended.

"Strike three!" the umpire said with a hint of regret to the call.

Billy turned and walked toward the dugout. Other players shrugged when they struck out looking and kicked at the dirt or gave the umpire the stink eye. Billy walked with a certain relief to his gait.

The next time Billy came to bat, Coach Williams used words to motivate. His goal now, the definition of the season's success, was getting Billy to do what he hadn't done.

"Son, this is why we play the game!" he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth like a megaphone. "There's nothing more fun than hitting the ball. You get three swings every time to the plate. Take them! They're all yours."

Billy rested the bat against his shoulder. He watched five pitches sail past him until the umpire again called strike three.

"I don't get it," Coach Williams said to his wife as he drove home. "I can't understand why he won't swing."

"He's scared, Dad," his son said from the back seat. Randy was a scrappy kid who would swing at anything. Bent over the plate, choking up on the bat, dirt on his uniform, playing with abandon, he only knew one gear.

"I think Billy bats the way the rest of us approach life," his wife said. "We're afraid of making a mistake, so we don't do much of anything."

"I don't need psychoanalysis; I need an idea," he said.

"Why don't you offer to give him something if he'll swing?" his son said.

The next game, as Billy slouched toward home plate the first time, Coach Williams walked halfway up the line. He pulled a crisp dollar bill out of his back pocket and waved it in the air.

"Hey, Billy, see this? Take three swings, and it's yours."

A murmur rose from the dugout. Kids whispered to each other. A whole dollar just for swinging three times? What a deal!

Billy stared at his coach like he was seeing a suicide squeeze sign. It was a bewildered look.

"Three swings and I'll give you this dollar. I don't care if you strike out. Just swing the bat. That's all you have to do."

"Batter up," the umpire said, waving Billy to the plate.

Billy dug in with his right foot and kept the bat against his shoulder as four pitches sailed in high. He trotted to first base.

"Don't you want the dollar?" Coach Williams said. "Sure."

"Well, you have to swing." He put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You're not going to hit the ball if you don't swing. And hitting the ball is what this game is about."

"But the pitches were high."

"I want you to swing, you hear?"

Two innings later, Billy came up again. The first pitch wobbled toward the plate, and Billy turned quickly enough as it bounced off his thigh and rolled to the backstop.

"Shake it off," Coach Williams said when Billy limped to first. "You'll get another chance. And the next time, you're going to swing, right?"

"It hurts," Billy said, trying not to cry.

## "I think Billy bats the way the rest of us approach life."





Coach Williams leaned over and looked underneath the batter's helmet and into the kid's eyes and saw something he didn't expect. What his wife had said in the car about Billy being like everyone else rose like a ground ball on an uneven infield. The tear that made its way down the boy's cheek looked a lot like his own, at least in those moments when he allowed himself to see his life in full view. To see the ways he'd held onto the bat himself. He'd thought about going to seminary and becoming a pastor early on, but life had gotten in the way and so had responsibilities. Life had become a little heavy, he had to admit.

"Next time up, you're going to swing like crazy, you hear me?"

"And you'll give me the dollar?" Billy said, snorting a little.

"You bet."

"You promise?"

Coach Williams nodded, and Billy set one foot on the base and another in the dirt. He wiped his face and leaned toward second base.

Last inning. Two outs. They were down a run, and there were runners on second and third. Randy, his son, waited on deck. But the score and the possibility of winning paled in comparison to Billy being up.

"Remember what I said?"

Billy nodded and dug in at the plate. The pitcher rocked and fired. Billy closed his eyes so tight he bared his teeth. But he swung. He missed the ball by two feet, but he swung.

"Strike one."

"That's what I'm talking about!" Coach Williams yelled, clapping. "Good swing! Good swing! Two more like that and you're a dollar richer."

The kids in the dugout were caught up in the game and clapped as well. And as the second pitch came in slowly, Billy swung again, and his bat was through the strike zone and around his back when the ball landed behind the plate and skittered to the backstop.

"Strike two!"

"There you go," Coach Williams said. "My wallet is gonna be lighter tonight by a dollar. I can tell it. One more swing, Billy!"

Another coach might have let Billy take a few pitches. If he hadn't swung, he'd be standing on first, with Randy at the plate. But there was something bigger than the game here. Randy clapped and pumped a fist on deck, and Coach Williams caught his son smiling at him.

The third pitch sailed from the pitcher's hand, and there something strange happened. Billy had his eyes open. And the bat was off his shoulder. He shifted his weight and pulled the bat through the strike zone just as the ball crossed home plate.

*Ping!*

Billy connected. He didn't just connect; he sent the ball toward center field like a bullet. And then he froze at home plate and watched it sail like some boat that was lifted by an unseen wind.

"Run!" Coach Williams yelled.

Billy took a step toward first and then another. The center fielder ran in, then realized his mistake, and turned and headed toward the fence. Timing his jump, he leapt and gathered the ball in his glove and fell to the ground and rolled, holding up what looked like an ice cream cone in the webbing. The umpire held up his right arm.

Oddly, nobody cared it was the last out. Coach Williams met Billy at first base and patted his back. Randy was there jumping up and down and then the whole team. Billy couldn't stop smiling.

The center fielder, the best player on the other team, came trotting by. "That was a great hit," he said to Billy.

"How'd that feel?" Coach Williams said.

"Felt great," Billy said, looking at center field and measuring how far the ball had traveled. At what had almost happened. He nearly had the hit that won the game. All because he had swung. All because there was someone who wanted him to swing and didn't care if he struck out. Didn't care a bit. He just wanted him to try. ☺

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CHRIS FABRY's latest novel is *Under a Cloudless Sky*. He wrote the best-selling *War Room* novelization. His novels have won five Christy Awards and an ECPA Christian Book Award. You can hear Chris daily on *Chris Fabry Live* on Moody Radio. Find him at [ChrisFabry.com](http://ChrisFabry.com).