

Jump for Center
by Barbara O. Webb

As you read the first part of this story, notice Pete Langdon's problem. (It is highlighted.) Then notice the solutions he tries and their results. (His solutions are underlined once. The results are italicized.) Why does Pete keep trying new solutions?

Pete Langdon and a neighbor, Margaret Silver Moon, were practicing basketball shots in the alley behind Pete's apartment building. Pete's father had put up a basketball hoop and backboard over the garage door, and Pete and his friends spent endless hours practicing free throws, lay-ups, and jump shots. Margaret was on their school's junior-high team for the second year. She was a good player.

This year Pete had tried out for the team sponsored by the Teen Sports Association. He was hoping to play center on the team because he was one of the tallest boys at school. He felt that being tall gave him an excellent chance to be chosen. **But he had a tremendous problem with jumping high enough to make good lay-up shots, and he flubbed jump shots miserably.**

Pete remembered the basketball tryouts last Saturday with embarrassment. He had gone into the gym with a lot of confidence. He was definitely the tallest player there. He even noticed the coach looking at him and smiling.

Pete impatiently waited to get through the warm-up exercises so he could begin to show his stuff. During passing practice he dribbled and passed with assurance.

"Nice passing there, Pete," the coach said as Pete directed crisp, accurate passes to his teammates. "Now lets try some jump balls."

Pete tensed his body as he stood facing Charlie Mack at center. Charlie was a good two inches shorter than Pete, but when the coach tossed up the ball, Charlie leaped up and whacked it before Pete even got off the floor. The coach frowned. "Lets try that again," he said.

At the end of the tryouts the coach drew Pete aside to give him some pointers on jumping. "Practice some more, Pete," said the coach, "and we'll see how you do during the scrimmage." Pete could see the coach was disappointed.

This week Pete had been making a valiant effort to follow the coach's instructions. He even jumped rope as boxers do when they work to get springiness in their feet. *But still it did no good.* Margaret could out-jump him every time they practiced – and she was four inches shorter than he was.

"It's my legs," Pete complained to Margaret. *"They're lead weights."*

"You need to get some real spring in your jumps," said a voice from behind them. "If you could get more lift, you'd be one of the best players in the neighborhood." It was Larry Cordoba, who lived across the alley from Pete.

Pete retorted with a sneer. "What would you know about it? Anybody who takes ballet can't know much about basketball."

"Aw, Pete, quit teasing Larry about taking ballet," Margaret said in a reasonable manner. "People should be able to do the things they like. Larry just enjoys dancing better than sports."

"That's all right," said Larry sarcastically. "I can see why this fellow is uneasy about making center on the Association team. He can't even jump three inches off the ground."

In a flash Larry raced over and took the ball from Pete's hands. The dancer pivoted, dribbled toward the basket, and made an effortless lay-up shot, putting the ball easily through the hoop. Larry wasn't tall, but he certainly moved swiftly and leaped like an impala.

Pete grabbed up the bouncing ball petulantly and turned to go home. He knew he had a problem with jumping, but he didn't need any ballet dancer to tell him so and show him up.

Pete worked arduously for three weeks, but at the first practice game the coach picked Charlie Mack for center. Pete flopped down on the bench disconsolately. He thought, "Larry was right about me. I'd do *anything* to learn how to jump right. Anything?"

That afternoon Pete's heart was pounding as he knocked on Larry's door. He swallowed hard when Larry peered out.

"Hi...I...uh...look, I'm sorry I teased you about taking ballet. Can you really show me something to help me jump better?" he blurted out.

Larry blinked. Then he stepped back. "Sure. Come on in."

In the living room Larry had Pete take off his shoes. Larry explained how to use the legs and feet as springs. He told Pete to start from bent knees with heels on the floor. Then he should pull up with the thighs, and push off from the feet – first from the heels, then from the balls of the feet, and then the final important push off from the toes.

Larry showed Pete exercises to develop strong, springy feet. When Pete was ready to leave after forty-five minutes, Larry said, "They're powerful exercises, Pete. If you do them regularly and carefully, you'll notice a difference."

Pete felt better than he had for a long time. He had been amazed to learn from Larry that sometimes coaches recommend ballet for their players. He thought about the pivot baseball players have to make, about the running and jumping of track stars. Crazy, but maybe there was some connection between ballet and sports.

In a few weeks Pete's team was playing the Clinton Park Reds. Margaret and Larry came to watch the game and cheer Pete on. But Charlie Mack started at center. Pete sat on the bench. By the end of the third quarter of the game, the score was 29-27 in favor of the Reds. Charlie Mack was exhausted and puffing hard. The coach signaled to Pete. Pete leaped up from the bench.

On the first jump ball, Pete felt himself rise high in the air and heard the solid whack of his palm against the ball. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a grin of appreciation on the coach's face.

Back and forth the ball went, with first one team scoring, then the other. The crowd roared with excitement. Then, with just half-minute to play, the score was tied, 35-35. The Reds had the ball. Their forward drove in for a lay-up shot. A miss! Four players jumped for the rebound. Pete, leaping like a kangaroo, out-jumped them all to capture the ball.

With a beautiful long pass Pete zoomed the ball down the court. One of his teammates caught it, pivoted free, and made an easy basket for the win 37-35. The crowd shrieked its approval. Larry and Margaret bounded down from the stands and congratulated Pete.

The coach came up to the three friends and patted Pete on the shoulder. "You really pulled it out with that rebound jump," he said. "I thought your feet were springs."

Pete grinned at Larry. "Thanks," he said.