



Hardball

Steven Barwin

Reading level: 4.2

978-1-4598-0441-8 PB

Book Summary

Baseball season has begun for the South Coast Sharks. As a senior, Griffin has college in his sights and plans to land himself a baseball scholarship. His determination causes him to turn a blind eye to the hazing of new players by the team captain, Wade. But when Griffin senses that his cousin Carson is getting the brunt of Wade's aggression, Griffin finally stands up to him. Soon after, steroids are found in Carson's locker, and he's kicked off the team. Can Griffin stop Wade's reign of terror, prove his cousin's innocence and still stay on track with his baseball dreams?

Prereading Ideas

- How far would you go to achieve a dream, like a full college scholarship?
- How do you decide when to intervene if you know someone is being bullied?

Connecting to the Text

Plot

- Fiction has to be believable to work. If anything in the text suddenly reminds readers that the story or the characters aren't real, the story loses its credibility and its ability to affect us emotionally. For example, characters who behave differently for their age than they would in real life, or sudden coincidences that wrap up the plot in a "just-so" manner, can make the story feel really fake. Break students into small groups and have them discuss what works in *Hardball*. They should support their findings with examples from the book. Have each group share their reasoning with the class. Can students think of a book they've read where the events, characters or actions do not feel believable?
- Discuss with students the idea of a book's premise. The premise is a one-sentence summary of the main idea of the story. It's a statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the actions in the story. Premise is a bit different than plot, which is a listing of the events in the story. It takes a bit of practice to figure out the premise of a story. You might want to start by discussing the premise of some familiar stories, such as *Harry Potter*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Hunger Games* or *Cinderella*. Divide students into pairs and see whether they can develop a clear statement of the premise of *Hardball*.

Character

- In chapter 1, we are introduced to Griff's cousin Carson in the following way:

We got to the diamond and tossed a ball around in the outfield until the rest of the Sharks showed. Being first sent a message to the others. Carson showed up next, a bundle of skinny energy under bright red hair.

This passage describes Carson using unique terms that pair his action with his physical appearance.

Have students choose five other book or movie characters, and describe them in a similar manner. Provide a few extra examples for them, such as:

Katniss aimed her arrow, a fierce pillar of courage beneath tattered clothes.

- Even though Carson didn't take anabolic steroids, he is convinced that his unfair suspension from the baseball team is going to be a permanent black mark on his record. He wonders whether maybe he should switch schools, just to have a fresh start. Have students write or talk about a character who did something wrong or who was framed as having done something wrong, where that misdemeanor followed them for a long time. How did that character get past it?
- Have students create a character sketch or web for Griff. Include his academic, social, emotional and physical dimensions. What makes Griff unique from other "sporty" characters? Where does he share stereotypical traits?

- Have students write a cinquain about Wade. A cinquain (say: *sing-cain*) is a five-line poem that describes a person, place or thing. Here's an example of a cinquain that describes summer:

summer
sunny, sultry
climbing, giggling, dreaming
season of possibility
endless

Line 1: a one-word title; a noun

Line 2: two adjectives

Line 3: three -ing verbs

Line 4: a phrase describing the topic

Line 5: a one-word synonym for the title (or a similar word)

Literary Techniques

A simile is a comparison, typically using the words “like” or “as.” It’s a literary technique that gives the reader a compelling image to help broaden his or her understanding of the text. Here’s an example of a simile from where Griff watches Wade coercing the new team members to do the senior boys’ homework.

I picked up the workbook and scanned my homework while Wade continued to fire insults at them the way an Uzi spits out bullets. (ch. 2)

Another one comes at the very end of the same chapter:

I followed Wade off the court and toward the baseball field. He bowled like a rabid dog the entire way.

As students read *Hardball*, have them look for other similes. Discuss: How do these comparisons enhance the description?

Vocabulary

Following is a list of vocabulary words from *Hardball*.

anticipation	expendable	seething
bunt	featherweight	shakedown
confront	giddy	shortstop
conniving	intimidating	slugger
curfew	outfield	southpaw
derby	profanities	taunting
dilapidated	reimburse	transition
dugout	sabotage	umpire

- In the above list, students will find just a few of the baseball-related vocabulary words from the story. Challenge students to flip through the book again, making note of as many baseball-related words as possible (include “bases,” “pitch,” “batter” etc.). Have them make a word search with their baseball terms.

- Have students choose an unfamiliar word from *Hardball*. (It doesn't have to be on the vocabulary list.) Ask them to provide a definition for that word based on its context, then explain how the context was helpful in creating that definition.
- Have students select 12 of the vocabulary words, provide a definition for each of them, and then use each of them in a sentence. Bonus points if they can use them all in one paragraph!

Connecting to the Curriculum

English

- Throughout *Hardball*, the author uses various figures of speech. For example, at the beginning of chapter 1, Wade reminds Griffin that “being seniors means that we’re at the top of the food chain.” Ask students what this figure of speech means. Have them come up with the hidden meanings of the following as well:
 - ◆ *I held out my hand to receive a George Washington from an old guy in a yellow golf shirt.* (ch. 2)
 - ◆ *I warned Wade not to do anything that might come back and bite him.* (ch. 2)
 - ◆ *I wasn't going to take this sitting down.* (ch. 5, where Griff goes to find Carson after drugs have been found in the boy's locker)
 - ◆ *Blood is thicker than water.* (ch. 8)
- In chapter 6, Wade forces Griff to drive a bunch of guys to watch the Red Sox play. His behavior is controlling, rude and demeaning. Challenge students to write down the words they would most like to say to Wade in regards to his conduct. They can do this as a letter, an email, a speech or as an exchange of dialogue.
- How is *Hardball* an apt title for this book?
- In chapter 10, Griff lands on a Wikipedia page while doing web research on steroids. Discuss Wikipedia with your students. How is it used (and usable) as a source of information? How does Wikipedia provide good information, and when can you use it? What do you have to consider when you use Wikipedia as part of your research of a given topic? Discuss biases against Wikipedia that people may have. Examine their validity. Review how to critically evaluate websites, and the relative strengths of a site like Wikipedia, or similar publicly edited wiki sites.

Math

- In chapter 2, readers learn that Griff's dad hasn't been selling as many BMWs as he might like. *I knew from my dad that business in South Florida was bad all around, he reflects. Cars baked on lots while malls closed and homes foreclosed.* In pairs, have students complete the following:
 - ◆ Find two or three graphs or charts that show the changes to the US economy in recent years (a reasonable time band is one decade, or around 2005–present). Share these with the class.

- ◆ Learn about mortgages. What are they? How do they differ from consumer loans? How do they differ from revolving credit (i.e. credit cards)? What happens when homeowners default on paying their mortgages? Learn about foreclosure.
- ◆ Try to explain the concepts of mortgages and foreclosure as though you were teaching a grade three student. It has to be simple to grasp!
- ◆ Devise three key tips that people should know before they take out a mortgage.
- Griff drives a Mustang. This is a powerful car that consumes a fair amount of gas. Have students research the cost of buying, maintaining and fueling a vehicle. You could break them into small groups and assign each group a different type of vehicle, e.g. an 8-cylinder truck (Ford F250); a 6-cylinder vehicle (Mustang); a 4-cylinder vehicle (Mazda 3); a hybrid (Toyota Prius); and an electric vehicle (Nissan Leaf). Two additional groups could possibly research the comparative costs of bussing, walking and biking.

Social Studies

- When the boys arrive at the Red Sox game (ch. 6), they joke about having to ignore the senior citizens and their oxygen tanks. Youth (and adults) in North America habitually ridicule the old and infirm. Have students use a Venn diagram to contrast the Western view of aging to the way in which Native American and other non-Western cultures value their aged. Start here: www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/25/what-other-cultures-can-teach_n_4834228.html. Who's got the better attitude toward aging? Discuss.
- In chapter 11, Wade asks the team how they're supposed to focus and make it to the finals when there is a witch hunt going on. Ask students: what is a witch hunt? Have them use Wikipedia to get a basic background on the witch hunts (Europe or New England are both acceptable), and then write one or two sentences explaining the use of the term.

Physical Education

- In chapter 1, Wade and Griff are the first to arrive at the diamond to begin warming up. *Being first sent a message to the others*, reflects Griff. Ask students: what message is he talking about?
- When the Sharks huddle up to listen to Coach Brigman, they get down on one knee. This shows respect for the coach—and it's also a ritual in baseball. Can students think of rituals that go along with other sports, e.g. chants, songs, actions, sayings, superstitions? Why are rituals important to sport?
- Have students take 15 minutes to research anabolic steroids. Ask them to prepare their answers to the following five questions in graphic format (e.g. in a chart or concept web):
 - ◆ What are anabolic steroids?
 - ◆ What are the reasons athletes use these performance-enhancing drugs?

- ◆ What is the main mechanism of action (i.e. how do they work?)?
- ◆ List the long-term physical effects of these drugs.
- ◆ How common is doping with anabolic steroids at the high school level? At the college level? At the professional level?
- In chapter 5, Griff decides to stop obsessing about how Carson is being set up, and instead focus on the game he's supposed to be playing. *Slow the game down*, he remembers his father saying to him. *Look at it one pitch at a time*. How does this moment-by-moment approach work in sport? Can you do this during a game or during practice? How could this kind of presence help in other parts of your life?

Health/Personal Planning

- When Wade begins tormenting Carson by demanding that the younger boy do his homework, Griff declines to get involved. *It wasn't a battle worth fighting*, he observes (ch. 1). What are the factors in Griff's decision? When do you know if a battle is worth fighting? What helps you decide?
- In chapter 2, Griff talks to his cousin about how to manage Wade's negative energy, sharing with Carson the coach's tips for how to stay in the game. "He talked about not focusing on winning," says Griff. "Paying attention to the moment. One batter, one pitch at a time." What does Coach Brigman mean by "paying attention to the moment"? Discuss with students the importance of staying mindful and in the moment. Research or discuss examples of how athletes use this mind-body connection to further their game.
- Now take the learning from the previous bullet one step further, to the research that shows how mindfulness decreases negative feelings like anxiety. Try a simple meditation with students (call it "practicing being in the moment," if you like): have them sit comfortably and just focus on their breathing as it goes into their body, then leaves their body. Challenge them to focus only on their breathing for as long as possible. After 2–3 minutes, ask: *Who was actually able to stay present with their breathing without their mind moving away onto other topics?* If your class is open to this, practice mindfulness meditation every day.
- At the Red Sox game (ch. 6), Rafael and Griff talk about the benefits of playing pro baseball. "Talk about a dream job," Rafael says to Griff. "Hundred and sixty-two games, different city every week, private jet, hotels." Griff adds to the list: playing baseball every day, no other jobs... These are the upsides of a career in professional sports. Have students list the downsides. How might these "really great" things begin to wear on a person? Or would they?
- What do you know about drug use and sales at your school? Do you think it would be easier or harder at your school than it was for Griff and Carson to find someone who deals drugs?
- After the scene where Wade torments the alligator to show off to the others, Tom thanks Griff for standing up to Wade on their behalf—and then asks him not to do it again. When Griff asks him why, Tom responds that "It makes it worse

for us" (ch. 9). Why does this happen—both in the book and in the real world? What's going on in the mind of the bully that makes him or her turn up the heat in this way?

- In chapter 12, when Griff joins Carson at his therapy session, he notices all the teens have their heads down as they focus on their phones. Have students research some of the health concerns about phone use. What harm does mobile device use cause to our bodies? Ask them to make an organized list or chart of at least five issues that arise from the high incidence of mobile phone use in North America.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. As the book opens, Wade is pinning all his hopes on a scholarship for college, and is obsessed with being scouted. Have you ever been scouted for a sport or other kind of passion (e.g. acting, singing, modeling)?
2. In chapter 1, Griff recommends to Carson that the younger guy stay quiet and just listen during the first week of initiation. As you see it, is this good advice? Think about the power of our words in shaping other people's perceptions of us. Are there times when you wish you had stayed quiet?
3. Carson, Tom and Adrian are forced to undergo a lengthy initiation when they join the team. In what other sports or situations are new joiners given a hard time in their first days or months?
4. Griff holds off on defending Carson throughout much of *Hardball*. What is his reason for this? Is it a valid reason? Discuss. When do you know it's time to wade into a situation where someone is being bullied?
5. For what reason does Griff put up with the way Wade treats the new team members, including his cousin?
6. At the end of chapter 4, Wade disses Carson, saying the kid thinks he's a better player than he actually is, and adding that "there's only room for one superstar on the Sharks." Do you agree? Is there room for only one superstar on any given group or team? Are there times when there is room for more? Discuss.
7. In chapter 5, Coach Brigman asks Tom and Adrian point blank whether they are being hazed by the older team members. Immediately, the boys say they are not. Why do they lie?
8. When Wade first denies any connection to the drugs that were found in Carson's locker, Griff feels a gut reaction that Wade was responsible. People call this "intuition"—our bodies know, deep down, when something is not right. When has your intuition spoken to you in the same way?
9. In chapter 8, when Griff breaks into Wade's locker to look for illegal drugs, he finds rotting lunches, old baseballs and smelly gym shorts. Wade obviously doesn't worry about keeping his locker neat. Where, in your world, are you messiest? Why do you think this is?

10. In chapters 12–13, when Griff confronts Derek with accusations that he's dealing drugs to Wade, the other boy denies it and tells Griff that it's actually Wade who's the dealer. When Griff presses for information, Derek tells him that he has one little rule that he likes to follow: "Trust no one." As you see it, is this a good rule to abide by throughout life? Does it keep you safe? What's healthier: staying safe and closed off, or opening up to deeper connections, but risking getting hurt in the process?
11. When Wade throws what Uncle Jim and his "goons" think is the bag of cash over the edge of the boardwalk, Jim's henchmen dive straight into the water after it (ch. 21). What does it take to be that dedicated to your employer? What would it take to convince you to be a bodyguard, henchman or other type of "fall guy"?
12. In chapter 21, when Griff speaks to the rest of the baseball team to inform them that Wade won't be playing baseball anymore, the guys vote for Griff to be their new captain. With such shocking news, however, there are bound to be a few questions. Write five to ten questions that you think the team members would want to ask Griff about Wade's sudden disappearance.

Author's note

Dear Reader,

Society places an unfair expectation on professional athletes to be superhuman. The dream of making it to the big leagues and finding a fast way to success leads some people to look for shortcuts. Steroids is just one of those temptations. Some people will stop at nothing, and will risk everything to get ahead in the world. They become very competitive. Ultimately, though, they end up harming themselves and bringing others down with them.

Hardball depicts how something like this might happen in the life of a school team. Hope you enjoy reading.

Steven Barwin

Resources

Baseball

The official site of Major League Baseball

<http://mlb.mlb.com/home>

Baseball Almanac

www.baseball-almanac.com

History of Baseball

<http://inventors.about.com/od/bstartinventions/a/Baseball.htm>

Baseball Hall of Fame

<http://baseballhall.org>

Peer Pressure

Steroids

http://kidshealth.org/kid/stay_healthy/fit/steroids.html

Are Steroids Worth The Risk?

http://kidshealth.org/teen/food_fitness/sports/steroids.html

Books

Fiction

Curelop, Jonathan. *Tanker 10*.

Hazelgrove, William. *The Pitcher*.

Long, Loren and Phil Bildner. *Water, Water Everywhere (Sluggers #4)*

Lyga, Barry. *Boy Toy*.

Shelton, Ryan M. *The Mentor*.

Sonnenblick, Jordan. *Curveball: The Year I Lost My Grip*

Tomasso, Phillip. *Sounds of Silence*.

Nonfiction

Gutman, Dan. *Shoeless Joe & Me*.

—*Babe & Me*

—*Mickey & Me*

—*Satch & Me*

—*Jackie & Me*

—*Roberto & Me*

—*Honus & Me*

—*Ray & Me*

Kelley, James. *Baseball*.

Ritter, Lawrence S. *The Glory of Their Times: The Story of the Early Days of Baseball Told By the Men Who Played It*

Author Biography

Steven Barwin is a middle school teacher. He is the author of *Hurricane Heat* in the Orca Sport series and several Lorimer Sports Stories novels, including *Fadeaway*, *Rock Dogs*, *SK8ER* and *Icebreaker*, which was chosen as a Canadian Children's Book Centre Best Books for Kids and Teens selection.

Author Website

www.stevenbarwin.com