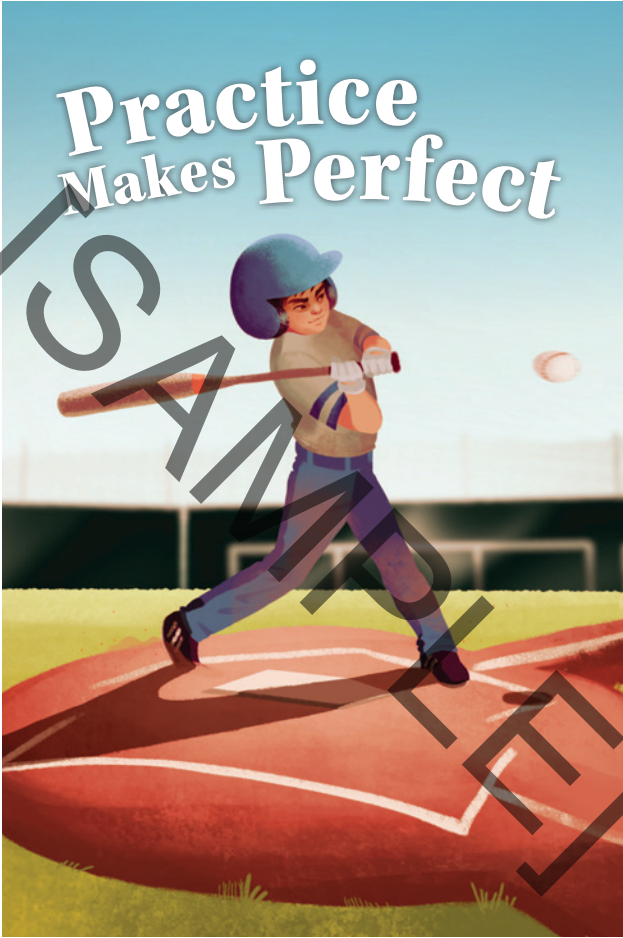


# Practice Makes Perfect



By Antonio Sacre  
Illustrated by Violet Tobacco

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**Illustrated by Violet Tobacco**

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## CHAPTER ONE



### Curve Ball

Enrique stepped out of the batter's box and stared at the hulking giant on the pitcher's mound. Did that dude have a mustache? *I'd like to see that kid's birth certificate. If he's 10 years old, I'm Babe Ruth.*

Enrique clamped his jaw so tightly that the muscles in his cheek bulged out

to make him look more menacing. He stared out at the pitcher as if his eyes could burn holes into his foe at any moment. This would surely generate unease—if not downright fear—into his opponent. He slapped down on his helmet like he'd seen some of the pros do on TV, but he hit himself too hard and couldn't help but flinch.

He heard a few parents in the stands laugh. Was it at him? He stole a glance into the opposing team's bleachers. Sure enough, two dads wearing Miami Mice baseball hats turned their heads quickly away, pretending that they didn't just make fun of a fifth grader trying to do one of the most difficult things in all of sports.

He glanced at the home field side and saw the oldest woman he knew—his grandma—his feisty abuelita.

She hoisted her fists menacingly in the air at the offending parents. "Don't let them bother you. They are wearing mice on their heads! You are the

champion of my *corazón!*” she shouted.

Enrique loved his abuelita with every fiber of his being, and her voice soothed him and calmed his nerves at the same time. He readjusted his helmet and snarled to himself, “You got this!”

Abuelita jumped up in her seat again and screamed, “Umpire! Tell those tiny mice parents they are *sinvergüenzas!*”

The umpire smiled under his mask and bellowed, “Play ball!”

Enrique’s Pelican teammates on the bench howled with laughter and smashed their forearms into each other. His best friend Roberto hung his wiry frame out of the dugout and yelled, “Reekay, your abuelita’s got your back! Oh, man, she dropped the *sinvergüenza* bomb on them! Those dudes are shamed!”

Enrique dug his back foot into the dirt and gripped his bat while he stamped in his front foot.

Enrique stared down the pitcher while Roberto yelled louder, “Level

swing, kid, give it a rope! Who's the MAN?"

Enrique whispered to himself doubtfully, "I'm the man."

"I can't HEAR YOU!"

"I'm the MAN!" Enrique sounded more confident this time.

"That's it, *hermano!*"

Enrique cleared his mind of the unkind dads, his spirited abuelita, and even his best friend emboldening him. The teenager masquerading as an 11-year-old lifted his front leg and catapulted the ball with lethal velocity right at Enrique's head!

Panic-stricken, he leapt out of the way a nanosecond before being decapitated, while the umpire screamed, "Strike three, you're out! Game over!" The hulk on the mound raised his arms in the air and looked toward the spectators, where one of the men with the Miami Mice hat thumped his chest at the pitcher.

Enrique turned back to the ump and lamented, "He nearly killed me with



that pitch!” As the umpire sauntered away, he said, “Perfect curve ball, kid, a flawless pitch.”

Roberto came over and draped his arm over his buddy. “Yeah, that curve was filthy. You weren’t hitting that guy.”

Enrique stared at the ground dejectedly and murmured, “But you hit his curve ball.”

“But Reekay, I practice.”

“I practice, too!”

“I practice before practice. Then, I go home and eat, and then I practice after practice. Then, I do homework and do you know what I do?”

“Go to sleep?”

“Practice.”

Enrique kicked at the ground and declared, “I’m never going to hit as good as you, even if I practice more!”

“You never know until you try. Let’s shake hands with those teenagers pretending to be fifth graders and get out of here. See you at school!”

## CHAPTER TWO



### Safe at Home

At home, Enrique sat down to a feast of Cuban food with his grandmother and her sister Elia. A huge mound of beans and rice dominated the table, a bowl of a tomato and beef dish called *ropa vieja* made the rounds, and *tostones* and *maduros*—green and ripe plantains—drenched with oil, perfectly

fried, and sprinkled with salt, came next. The aroma of Cuban cooking and the smiles of people who loved him most soothed his sore spirit. All traces of failure at the field, mean parents, and dangerous curve balls melted away, and he felt the warm embrace of his family. Still, underneath it all, he really wanted to be better at baseball. Who ever heard of a Cuban kid who couldn't play baseball?

"Abuelita, that dinner was amazing."

"What, you didn't like yesterday's dinner?"

Her question jolted him out of his musings about his shortcomings on the diamond, and he quickly said, "No, it was great!"

"Better than tonight's dinner?"

"No, tonight was delicious!"

She impishly asked, "What was wrong with last night's dinner?"

His great-aunt Elia laughed and patted Enrique on the hand. She said, "Give the boy a break, Maria."

“Thanks, *tía abuela* Elia,” Abuelita gave Enrique a wink. “Abuelita?”

“Yes, *querido*?”

“I want to get better at baseball.”

“Elia, do you remember that famous old saying from Cuba that Papi used to say? Something about the baseball and the box it came in?”

Elia tapped her palms together, thinking. “*Sí*, a famous old *dicho* about baseball, something about a baseball and a box. Yes, a baseball and a box. The box, the baseball, something something something.”

“Elia!”

Elia blurted, “No, I forgot.”

“Why didn’t you just say you forgot?”

Abuelita waved her arms at such ridiculous angles and with such energy that Enrique had to stifle an impulse to laugh.

Elia implored, “Don’t yell at me!”

Abuelita practically bellowed, “I never yell at you!”

Enrique struggled to contain

his laughter, and his body shook with laughs.

The two ladies shouted in unison, “NO LAUGHING AT YOUR ELDERS!”

Enrique’s eyes grew large, and then, all three of them began to laugh together. When they recovered, Elia said, “Nothing like a good laugh to clear the mind!” She wiped tears from the



corners of her eyes and blurted out, “I remember the *dicho!* ‘The ball is round, but it comes in a square box.’”

Enrique looked at them quizzically. “What does that mean?”

Abuelita shrugged, “I don’t know, but Papi used to say it, so it must mean something. And you’ll get better at baseball. You’re Cuban. It’s in your blood.”



“What if I left it back in Havana when we left Mom and Dad?”

Enrique’s heart filled simultaneously with sadness, longing, and love for his faraway parents. Silence descended on the table while Elia examined her hands and Abuelita blinked back tears.

“There are some things you can’t ever lose, no matter how grim the circumstances feel.” Abuelita reached over and tapped his chest gently. Then, in an effort to change the subject, she turned to Enrique and said, “Go do your homework, I’ll clean up tonight. But don’t get used to it!”

## CHAPTER THREE



### Practice Makes Perfect

The next day, Roberto and Enrique sat on the wall next to the playground apparatus. Younger children slipped off the bars and crashed onto the squishy rubber mat underneath, then leapt back up again.

“So, when do we start practicing?” Enrique asked.

“Now!” Roberto scampered down the wall and landed on his feet with feline grace. “Assume the position.” He pulled Enrique off his perch and squatted into a flawless hitting stance, powerfully balanced yet nimble on his feet.

Enrique stared doubtfully at his teammate and friend and imitated the position, but with far less ease and power. Roberto shook his head incredulously and said, “Think about this for a moment. Delve deep into that cranium and ponder, how does one hit a hurtled sphere with authority?”

“Nice vocab—you’ve been studying! I hit with my arms and an aluminum baseball bat.”

“NO, YOU HIT WITH YOUR HIPS!” Roberto yelled so loud a kid toppled off the bars. She bounced on the rubber mat, looked up at Roberto, and squealed, “Again!”

“Not going to happen, squirt. Reekay, do you remember the salsa

dance step, and the move with the hips?” Roberto glided into the dance move, hands holding an imaginary partner, hips swiveling front and back to music only he could perceive.

Enrique mimicked the steps, hips swiveling just as briskly.

“YOUR HIPS!” Roberto yelled again. The same little girl tumbled off the bars and bounced off the mat, yelping, “AGAIN!”



“Berto, what does salsa have to do with it?”

Roberto continued dancing, hips moving, his arms up by his shoulders, holding an imaginary partner. As his legs and hips revolved, his hands met each other and held a phantom bat. Then, he held the invisible bat in a ready batting stance, squared off his feet, and cranked his hip forward in the same dance motion, but not stepping forward with his feet.

“The power and speed originate from the hips.” Enrique imitated him: first the salsa, then arms moving to a phantom bat, then a powerful swing.

Enrique shouted, “THE HIPS!” This time, three little kids slipped off the bars and bounced onto the rubber.

They all squealed, “AGAIN!” The aide blew her whistle, and all the children scrambled off to their lines. Roberto and Enrique laughed and said to each other, “The hips!”

## CHAPTER FOUR



### It's a Game of Inches

Enrique stood outside the chalked batter's box, eyes closed, swaying his hips to the salsa music in his head. The umpire barked, "Hey kid, this ain't a nightclub. Play ball!" The parents on both sides of the field laughed, and the pitcher smirked. Enrique assumed his stance in the box as the pitcher slung a

fastball toward home plate.

“Outside, ball one!” chattered the ump. Enrique focused on the pitcher as another fastball sped right down the pike.

Enrique’s hips shot forward, his arms following powerfully behind, and he absolutely demolished the ball! Roberto screamed, “HIPS!” Enrique stared at the ball with amazement as it rose toward the clouds, deep toward left field! He whirled his bat to the ground and elevated his arms to the sky! The ball drifted, drifted, drifted, and floated just outside the foul pole.

“FOUL BALL, strike one!”

Enrique’s dugout groaned, and his abuelita let out a string of colorful Cuban curse words that made everyone laugh. Enrique picked up his bat, distraught.

Roberto, with a huge smile on his face, yelled, “It worked! Another one, just like that one!”

The pitcher’s smirk turned to a look

of worry as he sent in another fastball, and Enrique wrenched a screaming liner that nearly decapitated the third base coach.

“Sick swing, kid. Just put ‘er in play!” screamed Roberto.

Enrique stepped out of the batter’s box. He thought of his parents and smiled. He imagined them in the stands, next to his abuelita, cheering him on in colorful Spanish. He wanted to make them proud, to prove to them and to himself that he still had some of the innate Cuban baseball ability from his country of birth. He swiveled his hips again and stepped into the box.

The pitcher unleashed a ball, straight for Enrique’s head. Through his fear, he stepped toward it, hips twirling, arms coming through, and he met the ball squarely in the middle of the plate as it curved. The ball rocketed toward the gap between shortstop and second base.

Enrique sprinted toward first base,

and the shortstop flew through the air, laying out perpendicularly to the red dirt. He speared the ball and tumbled to the ground—Enrique was out.

The parents in the bleachers leapt up, screaming, “What a play!” Back in the dugout, Roberto shouted, “Hey, Reekay, you crushed the ball three times! You keep doing that, one day, it’s going to happen.”

“You think so?” Hope blossomed in his chest.

“I know so,” Roberto said.



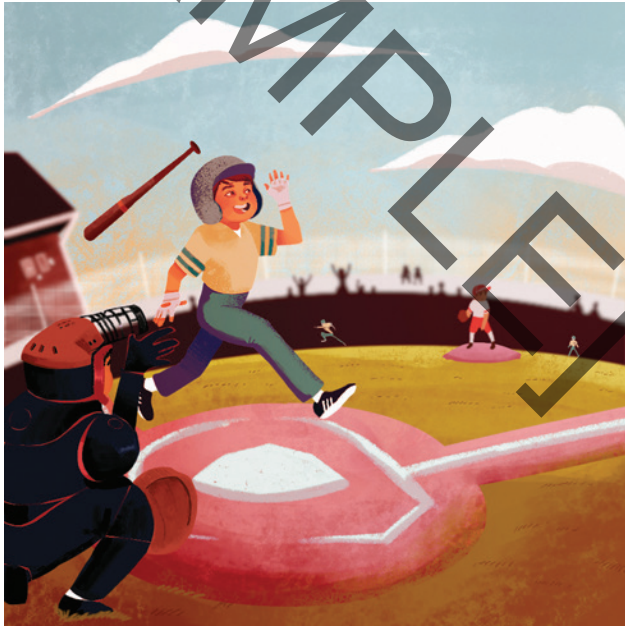
The next day, Roberto and Enrique went back to their favorite spot after lunch: the wall near the structure where kids slipped off the bars and smacked onto the rubber mat.

“Reekay, if I don’t finish my math assignments, I can’t play in our last game against the Miami Mice.” He scuffed at the ground with his shoes and shook his head. Enrique turned

toward his friend, unsure of what to say.

Roberto scratched his chin and shrugged his shoulders. “It’s perplexing to me. I just can’t multiply fractions.” Enrique thought about this for a moment and chucked Roberto on the shoulder.

“Roberto, there’s one secret to multiplying fractions. SIMPLIFY!” A youngster fell off the bars, bounced off the rubber mat, and yelped, “Again!”



Both Enrique and Roberto yelled in unison, “Not going to happen, squirt!” Roberto turned to his *compadre* with a dubious look mixed with a tinge of hopefulness.

Suddenly, Enrique realized that the secret to mastering nearly anything had nothing to do with innate ability. The secret seemed to be perseverance and practice.

“Simplify the fractions first. Remember when you made me practice moving my hips so I could hit more effectively? You have to practice seeing numbers in different ways. You ready to practice?”

Roberto smiled at Enrique, nodded his head, and said, “Ready to practice, bro.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



### Who's the Man?

Enrique stepped out of the batter's box and stared at the familiar hulking giant on the mound. Did he grow taller since their last matchup? He looked like Paul Bunyan now but more villainous. The score was 3–3. Enrique faced a full count with Roberto standing on third base, ready to run

home. All Enrique had to do was get Roberto home and get on base himself, without getting out, and the game would be over. While Enrique hit the ball hard all day, none fell for hits.

“You can do this, *mijo!*” Abuelita screamed. The dad in the Miami Mice hat yelled to the pitcher, “You made this kid look foolish last time!”

Abuelita roared, “Don’t make me come over there, *sinvergüenza!*”

Roberto danced on and off the bag, down the third base line in a rhythmic cadence, attempting to vex the pitcher. “Dude, just put the ball in play, and I’m going to fly home!” he yelled to Enrique.

Enrique stared at the pitcher. “Bring it!”

The pitcher rocked back and slung the ball with a massive heave. Enrique’s hips swirled, and he crushed the ball, high, far, deep, deep, deep into center field. Enrique sprinted toward first, and the center fielder leapt at the

wall. He missed it! Enrique reached first base easily, then twirled toward third base to watch Roberto race toward home. The center fielder had picked up the ball and hurled it toward home plate. Roberto launched into a perfect slide, maneuvered around the lunging catcher, and slapped the back of home plate.

The umpire slashed the air with his hands parallel to the ground, bellowing over the noise from the spectators. “SAFE!”

The Pelican bench erupted onto the field on top of Roberto in a frenzy.

As Enrique observed the tumult at home plate, he crossed himself, kissed his fingers, pointed toward Abuelita, then extended his hand to the sky and sent a blessing across the ocean to Cuba, to where he could feel his parents watching. He knew they would be proud of him.

The pitcher pounded his glove and pointed a finger toward Enrique, his



face full of grudging admiration. “You got me this time, kid.”

Enrique nodded, and the dad in the stands griped, “That was luck!”

“That,” Enrique corrected, “was practice.”

From the scrum, Roberto exclaimed, “WHO’S THE MAN!?”

Enrique threw his helmet high in the air, sprinted toward his team at home plate, and leapt in the air high above the scrum. Time slowed down, and it felt like he hovered there, transfixed in time, everything frozen, except for a smile that stretched longer and longer on his face, until finally, gravity and time caught back up to him. He crashed in a heap on top of his team.

They all shouted, “Reekay! Reekay!”

Surfing on top of his teammates, Enrique shouted jubilantly, “It’s all in the hips!”

The whole team yelled, “Hips hips, hooray!”

# About Us

## The Author

Antonio Sacre was born in Boston to a father from Cuba and an Irish-American mother. He grew up speaking Spanish and English and now tells stories and writes books about what it was like growing up in those two cultures. He played competitive baseball for 15 years. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children, all of whom can crush a fastball.

## The Illustrator

Violet Tobacco illustrates from her small apartment in Atlanta, Georgia. She grew up drawing and performing in theater, so when she originally chose her career path, she started a degree in theater studies. But she realized that her true love was storytelling, and illustration is where her heart found a home.

## Book Club Questions

1. Some people believe that the toughest thing in all of sports is to hit a baseball. Do you agree? If not, what is harder?
2. What does the saying “The ball is round, but it comes in a square box” mean to you?
3. Why does Enrique live with his abuelita and great-aunt Elia?
4. Can someone who is not talented in art, sports, or an academic subject achieve success through practice alone?
5. Think of a time you completed something challenging. How much of your success was due to your own ability, and how much was due to help from others?
6. Would you rather get better at something yourself or help others get better at something? Explain your thinking.

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