

Sportswriter/ESPN host scores big with sideline: children's books

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Mike Lupica has long been known for his quick wit and no-holds-barred approach in the tough world of sports journalism. No one expected him to make a second career as a warm and fuzzy children's novelist. No one, it seems, including Mike Lupica.

"I only accidentally got into writing this kind of [children's] book," says Lupica, who will be at Bethlehem's Moravian Book Shop on Tuesday to sign two new kid-friendly titles, "Hot Hand" and "Two-Minute Drill."

He explains that while he has loved his work covering the major leagues in a career that dates back to his first assignment for The New York Post in 1977, one of the greatest inspirations in his life came from a source closer to home.

"My middle son and a friend of his got cut from their basketball team," Lupica says. "And I think the only reason was because they were too small."

Lupica, who had many years of experience coaching youth league sports for his three sons and daughter, took action. "I started a team of my own," he says.

All the kids who got cut that year joined Lupica's band of outcasts. He booked their schedule and took them on the road.

"And we had an amazing season," he says. "We started out being terrible," he admits. "But by the end of the year we got good." He calls their story "something great" and felt that it deserved to be told, possibly as a movie or a novel.

Lupica, who had written fiction before, such as 2001's "Bump and Run," had never thought about writing for children. He was (and still is) busy hosting ESPN's "Sports Reporters" and writing a New York Daily News column. His agent agreed that there was something to the story and urged him to write an outline. That outline became "Travel Team," a novel for 9- to 12-year-olds and a 2004 New York Times Best Seller.

"I realized that every parent had a similar story," he says. "Everyone has a

story about how sports breaks their kid's heart for the first time." Lupica credits word-of-mouth among parents for the book's success. "They started telling each other about 'Travel Team,' and before long boys and girls who didn't usually want to read were reading my book."

The success led to several other books for preteens, including "Heat," a story about a scandal in Little League Baseball, and "Miracle on 49th Street," a story about a young girl and a star of the Boston Celtics.

The titles "Hot Hand" and "Two-Minute Drill" are part of a new series, "Mike Lupica's Comeback Kids." He plans on releasing two titles each year. The books have similar themes but are not a series in the traditional sense because each is a stand-alone title with its own characters and settings. Lupica is aiming to engage even younger readers than he did with his previous children's books. With their large print and young characters, the books are ideal for children ages 8 to 10.

"Hot Hand" tells the story of a basketball player who loves to shoot the ball and must learn to share the glory with teammates. Through an interaction with his brother, a classical pianist, he commits an even greater act of unselfishness off the court.

"Two Minute Drill" is a football story, but also a tale of unlikely friendship. "The golden boy who is the star of the football team meets the smart kid," Lupica explains. "The smart kid is new to the school and the golden boy has a secret."

The pair become friends and each begins to learn from the other. They shine on the field, but the ending touches an emotional chord that transcends what happens during the game.

Lupica sees the ugliness of sports every day. He has written about baseball's steroid scandals and the greed present in all sports. But as a parent and veteran of countless youth league games where kids pour their hearts out just because they love to play, he still believes in the importance of sports. "These books are about the pure aspect of sports -- about loyalty and friendship and picking yourself up," he says.

And even though he's a New York guy, he has a kind word for local fans. "I really thought the Phillies would go farther this year," he says.

Only in fiction.