ForeWord Reviews

PICTURE BOOKS

The Farm Team
Linda Bailey
Bill Slavin, illustrator
Kids Can Press
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With sheep on skates and a pig in the goal, the idea of a "farm team" is imaginatively reinvented in this hockey-themed Cinderella story. Farmer Stolski's animals love to play hockey, despite the fact that they've failed to bring home the prestigious Stolski Cup for fifty years running. As they face off against their arch-rivals, the Bush League Bandits, the members of the Farm Team find unexpected strength in the smallest members of their team—a piglet, and Marietta, a chicken "molting on the Farm bench."

The author, who has written the Stevie Diamond mysteries as well as numerous picture books, and the illustrator, whose art has received wide acclaim, including a *Foreword Magazine* 2001 Book of the Year Award for *The Bone Talker*, have previously worked together on the Good Times Travel Agency series and picture books featuring the irrepressible dog Stanley. *Stanley's Party* received numerous awards and was "highly recognized" by Child magazine. *The Farm Team* offers a similar combination of quality picture-book elements and goofy child appeal present in the earlier offerings of this Canadian duo.

As befits a story set "way up north where the ponds stay frozen most of the year," the narration is folksy, evoking the feeling of a tall tale passed down the generations. The rival team is "the nastiest, smelliest, mangiest, snarlingest bunch of varmints you've ever seen." In this action-packed tale, the puck gets "whacked," a goose "deked past the Bandit's goalie to score," and a particularly scary opponent proceeds to "smash, bash, whack, crack, slice, dice, and fricassee one Farm player after another." Such perfectly chosen verbs add a play-by-play feel to the story that will increase the charm of this tale as a read-aloud.

The homey narrative style is matched by the warmth of Slavin's acrylic illustrations. The reader can't help but root for the adorably outfitted Farm Team, with its chickens in their eggshell helmets and goalies—a pig and cow—with sheaves of straw tied to their limbs for padding. Young hockey fans will be thrilled with this offering, which will appeal to sports fans and animal lovers in kindergarten through second grade, as well as the adults who read aloud to

them. This is one farm team that is definitely not ready to be put out to pasture.

Carolyn Bailey