

A Long Road Ahead

A group of about ten shirtless male runners in various colored shorts are running on a dirt road that winds through a lush green landscape. The road is flanked by grassy hills and a fence. In the background, there are rolling hills and a small town or village. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a clear day.

A Tale of Two Runners Redux

A NOVEL BY JIM KNOEDEL

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A Long Road Ahead is entirely a work of fiction. Although some of the book is based on real people and real events, it is all a creation of my thirty-five years of coaching, not on a factual recount of events.

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A LONG ROAD AHEAD – A TALE OF TWO RUNNERS REDUX

First Edition. July 24, 2021

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www.taleoftworunners.com

This book is dedicated to:

My wife Denise who has supported me through this adventure, one much crazier than I could have ever guessed, encouraging me to take on a task that was years in the making, and finally putting my thoughts onto paper

And

To the hundreds of athletes I coached over the years at so many schools who challenged me to help fulfill their dreams. I hope I encouraged your aspirations and found the potential in each one of you, creating a time in your life that you look back on fondly.

Prologue

June 1, 1970

The black and white poster was taped to the inside of my bedroom door for motivation. A picture of an Oregon runner circling the track, his head cocked slightly to the side as though trying to pick up the sound of his cheering fans. Sporting long blond hair with darker sideburns an inch below his ears, he owned a steely gaze that only seemed to emphasize his competitive nature. Strung out in the distance behind were great athletes, people any serious runner would recognize, yet athletes who couldn't match his toughness.

This stud was the reason we were hitchhiking to the 49th NCAA Championships in Des Moines. Come hell or high water we would be in the stands at Drake. For Ray Clancy and me it was the chance of a lifetime. To see the freshman legend, the one who ran 8:42 in high school: Steve Prefontaine.

He was the Steve McQueen of running. The coolest cat on the track. One of the rare, extroverted distance runners unafraid to show a little swagger. To speak his mind. He played to the crowd like a diva at the Royal Opera House basking in the adoration of his fans, producing gut-wrenching performances and unbeatable times. Doubters challenged his larger than life persona wearing "Stop Pre" t-shirts at meets, but he simply smirked, kicking ass, and taking names, donning the provocative t-shirt for a cooldown on the track. I could hardly sleep Thursday night in anticipation of the trip.

Mom dropped us off early Friday morning at the top of the Interstate-80 ramp in Iowa City that led west towards Des Moines.

We walked down the entrance until we were about twenty-five yards from the main road and held up a cardboard placard adorned with a "DM" stating our destination to each passing motorist. With short haircuts and a gym bag each, we took turns displaying the sign to every car like vaudeville barkers. Within ten minutes we got our ride to the state capital.

Clancy told the salesman we were going to watch the NCAA Track & Field Meet, but all Mr. Loman wanted to talk about were the times he hitchhiked in 1942 while he was on leave from the Navy.

Two hours later we were dropped off at 31st Street in Des Moines, walking towards the Drake campus past massive oaks on long boulevards as we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We talked of Marty Liquori and Dick Buerkle of Villanova, Garry Bjorklund of Minnesota, and Dave Wottle of Bowling Green, Roscoe Divine and Steve Prefontaine of Oregon – all of who we would see in person for the first time. As we neared the stadium we could hear echoes of the PA announcer in the distance.

Stepping into the stadium proper with a program in hand, we absorbed the blue tartan track that jumped out at us, the scene as enticing as a Caribbean cove. Spread before us was a sunken football field set below the track level, a tall white timing stand that must have been fifteen feet high, to the north a gigantic scoreboard with spots for eight runners and times.

Clancy pointed to the far side of the stadium where the high jump was going on, leading the way as we walked along the rows of wooden benches towards the action. Our eyes were locked in on the high jump competition, both of us sitting in tandem as a lanky Indiana jumper began his approach.

The blond-headed straddler ran at the foam pit in a straight line almost parallel to the bar, taking off from his inside foot and kicking the outside one up at take-off, the Hoosier's stomach and chest curling around the triangular metal bar in a smooth parabola as he cleared 6'8". An official raised a white flag as he rolled out of the pit. Clancy pointed.

“Look, the next guy is doing the Fosbury Flop!”

We both leaned forward as the Oregon State jumper did a “J-shaped” approach on the high jump apron and flew backwards over the bar like he was leaping onto an upper bunk.

“Radical!” I turned to Clancy.

As exciting as this and other events were, the highlight of our day was watching the skinny runners doing last second strides on the track getting ready for the last race of the day, the 6-mile. At the gun, a UTEP runner jumped to the lead and set the early tempo, leading the field through the first two miles at an astounding pace. Clancy clicked the split hand on his stopwatch and showed it to me.

“9:15, can you believe that? And they have four miles to go! I can’t even run 9:15. Man, this is so cool!”

Bob Bertelsen of Ohio University took over the lead on the tenth of the twenty-four laps and won in an astounding 27:57.5. Clancy scribbled on the program and then looked up.

“Wow, he averaged just under 4:40 per mile!”

We watched all the runners shake hands after the race, soaking up the excitement, and then climbed the stairs to the exit. I dropped a dime in the pay phone inside the fieldhouse door and Uncle Bob picked us up at on the corner of 24th and Forest, treating us to hamburgers on the grill that evening.

We crashed on the living room floor atop sleeping bags, beginning our new day with an eight mile run down Beaverdale Avenue. All our talk was about today’s races. After a huge breakfast, we packed our gym bags and headed back to Drake to watch the finals.

Dark clouds rolled in from the west as my uncle waved and drove away. Entering the stadium, we pulled out our yellow hooded rain jackets as the ominous clouds began to spit the initial drops of precipitation.

While the clerk lined up runners for the 3000 meter Steeplechase, a blast of cool air ushered in a sudden thunderstorm, spectators scrambling up the stairs and under the covered walkway behind the

seats. We stood under the portico wondering how long the rainfall would last, listening for the sound of a starter's pistol.

"How far is 3000 meters anyway?" Clancy peeled his second banana as we heard the 32-caliber fire.

"It's a little less than two miles. Did you see that guy in the program from Bowling Green - Sid Sink? What a name." I chuckled. "Yeah, it figures he would be in a race with water."

Despite the steady downfall I still took peeks at the race, my body pressed against the entrance wall for protection as I watched the competition, edging back to the protected walkway to give Clancy updates. The Falcon from Bowling Green was golden, Sink pulling away from Leibenberg and Savage on the last lap to win the event in an NCAA Record of 8:40.9.

Staring out at the rain, enjoying the excitement of the competition, I was suddenly struck by the certainty that one day I too would run alongside such greats at the National Meet. That was my goal. As audacious as it sounded I knew it was my destiny. The rain let up and spectators slowly crept back into seats.

The mile was next. We sat on multiple copies of the Drake *Times Delphic* to keep the water off our Levi cutoffs, excited about the next race. Clancy leaned forward and pointed at Dave Wottle of Bowling Green and Howell Michael of William & Mary as they came out of the athlete's gate on the northeast end of the track. A burst of sunlight flashed through the dark clouds that glistened off the track but it was gone seconds later.

Announcer Jim Duncan went through the names in the final as Marty Liquori stepped on the track. All eyes turned towards him, the Wildcat fiddling with the waistband of his shorts as he did a last stride around the corner slowing to a stop right in front of us.

The crowd quieted for the gun, the lanky Villanovan shooting to an early lead with the field close on his heels. Clancy's splits were only background noise as Liquori circled the oval while Jim Duncan identified the pack trailing behind at the halfway point – teammate

Chris Mason, Wottle, and Michael, his competitors so timid not one was willing to challenge my Villanova idol.

On the backstretch of the last lap Liquori opened a big gap on the field, the Wildcat twenty yards in front of the nearest competitor with half a lap remaining. From the trailing pack Wottle charged after a tiring Liquori, the crowd of eighteen thousand cheering loudly as the distance between them dropped from ten yards, to five, and finally inches at the line.

From our position at the beginning of the last straight it was impossible to tell who won, only Jim Duncan's announcement that Liquori edged Wottle by 0.2 with a 3:59.9 settling guesses from the crowd.

"Whoa! That was super cool." I slapped Clancy's hand. He showed me the stopwatch.

"Boy, I thought Wottle was going to catch him. That was close. Closer than Liquori realized!"

"Folks, you saw history here today." Announcer Jim Duncan paused dramatically. "The first sub 4:00 mile on the Drake track! 3:59.9! Let's give Liquori a big hand. C'mon, let him know how much this means to us."

Applause shot from the stands, the happy Villanova runner waving to the crowd as opponents patted him on the back.

We had been so intent on the race I didn't notice the dark clouds returning from the west. As if on cue another torrential downpour hit the stands and spectators scrambled underneath the bleachers again. The rain finally eased up and we crept back into the stands, Jim Duncan claiming this next event was going to be a "dandy".

Five minutes later BYU's Ralph Mann set a World Record in the 440-yard Hurdles, running a 48.8 despite rain bouncing so hard off the tartan surface it looked like hail. My Converse All-Stars and cutoffs were soaked as we dashed back under the covered walkway again, frustrated by the crazy weather.

The sub 4:00 mile by Marty Liquori and the World Record by Ralph Mann were astounding, but the biggest race for me was still

to come. The premier race of the weekend. While we waited, I stared across the infield at two humongous discus throwers from Kansas, the pair clad in the pink shorts and sky blue singlets as the implements skidded through the grass like stones skipping on water.

Sun began to peek through the black clouds, the brightness almost startling. It was the strangest day. Murmurs rumbled through the crowd and heads turned, clusters of spectators pointing towards the scoreboard at the north end of the stadium as the three-mile runners burst onto the track. We looked for the runner in green and yellow.

I spied Prefontaine and nudged Clancy, tremors running down my spine as he underlined Gerry Lindgren's NCAA record of 13:33.8 in the program. He pointed out the four challengers - Bjorklund of Minnesota, Buerkle of Villanova, Kardong of Stanford, and Fredericks of Penn State. They all did one last stride on the homestretch before they lined up on the waterfall.

At the gun, the St. John's runner went to the lead, setting a pace everyone seemed content to follow as the field circled the oval in a tight-knit cluster. On the third lap, Prefontaine grew impatient and took over the race, leading the pack through the initial mile at 4:28 and the two at 9:03.

One by one, the relentless tempo of the Oregon freshman phenom dropped competitors from the front pack just as quickly as an infant drops Cheerios from a highchair, a bunch of sixty-sixes leaving only three challengers remaining with a single lap left.

Prefontaine showed his 3:57 mile speed, producing in a 57.7 the last 440 to set a Collegiate Record of 13:22.0 on the blue oval. As he jogged around the stadium on the victory lap, we sprinted down to the railing, hoping to slap his hand. I spotted a gauze bandage wrapped around his foot as he approached, a blotch of red staining the wrap that was stark against the white.

He held the Adidas Tokyo spikes in his left hand and reached high with his right as he ran along the rail slapping hands with his fans. I leaned sideways with my hand extended and could feel the contact as he jogged by.

“He slapped my hand! I felt him slap my hand!” I stared reverently at my palm and declared. “I’m never going to wash it.”

Chapter 1

June 9, 1970

The NCAA meet in Des Moines was inspiration for me to train, to get more miles in for my burgeoning career, but it was also a big wakeup call. There was a glaring discrepancy between my ability and where collegiate success was found. All the distance runners I watched at Drake handled paces far beyond my range. To run that tempo for a three or six mile race would take months of hard training. Probably years. Their talent was intimidating, a sudden nervousness overcoming me every time I pondered the long and winding collegiate road ahead.

Despite the small scholarship the Iowa coach provided to cover cost of my dorm room, I still had to find a summer income to pay for books, school supplies, and the \$315 for tuition each semester – no matter how inconvenient I found it. So I continued to mow grass around the neighborhood at \$2 a lawn, the process of accumulating money for college as slow as filling Lake Macbride with rocks.

The mimeograph workout sheet Cretz sent out to each runner showed up in an official University of Iowa Athletics envelope the first week in June. I eagerly tore it open like a birthday check from my rich aunt, scanning the cover letter that laid out important dates and forms I needed to return, the second page a sample of training for each month. I re-checked the envelope to see if there was more information, but that was all it contained. His simple plan left more questions than answers.

Coach Cretzmeyer did mention he was going to give out shoes the first day, but also knew the ones I had wouldn't last another three weeks, let alone three months. I pulled \$14 from my lawn mowing money and biked down to Wilson's Sporting Goods to buy another pair of Adidas Olympiads, hopeful they would make it through the summer.

My mileage was steady at 8-9 miles/day in June with a long run every Sunday, but I could already tell getting it up to seventy-five a week was going to be a challenge. Some days the reality of it seemed impossible. My peak mileage at East High was sixty-four, but now it was my starting point, not the grand finale. Highs from the excitement of my new venture were over-matched by the vice-like grip of my nervousness.

Sunday runs were the excitement of my week because they were the only days Clancy and I could run together. Our jobs never seemed to mesh. Usually, it was me and my mind during the weekdays, but on Sundays I had someone to talk with and it made the time fly.

"Did you watch the Draft Lottery on TV Wednesday night?" I nodded at Ray as he continued. "My birthday is in January, so I won't be going through it until next year, but it's a little weird to think about."

"Yeah. Watching them randomly pull those blue capsules out of a tub" I shook my head. "Realizing this is deciding someone's fate... well, it's scary. Mine is in 1952 so I don't have to worry about it, but if it were in 1951 like some of the guys in our class I would have been number twenty-five!"

"I would have been one hundred-six." Ray sighed. "Can you imagine being in Vietnam? I'd think about going to Canada."

"Yeah, but as long as we stay in school we get a deferment, so we're cool."

Conversation ceased as we reached the six-mile turn around point. We hit the intersection and crossed to the opposite side of the road so we were facing into traffic. Time to get hay in the barn. After we finished the eleven miles, I told Ray about my trip next weekend.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. I’ll be gone next Sunday. Our family is going into Chicago to see my aunt and uncle. My cousin mentioned a relay race at one of the high schools, so I think I’m going to run it.”



Memorial Day weekend, the Gatens clan had come from Chicago into Iowa City for the holiday, my cousin Mitch talking about a 24-hour relay in late June and the need for a tenth man while we chowed on hotdogs and potato salad at the family picnic. It sounded crazy at first, yet the more we talked, the more intriguing the challenge sounded.

On our morning run before the big parade on Monday I told Mitch I was all-in, excited about taking on a new adventure. At least a mile every hour for twenty-four hours. Probably twenty-six or twenty-seven miles if the team was any good. Each of the rest intervals would have fifty-some minutes between – the race going on all day and all night.

Dad doublechecked with his brother to make sure the Demolition Derby at Santa Fe Speedway was on tap for that Saturday evening and there was a Cubs game on Sunday afternoon, the pair chanting the radio ditty during commercials as they drank beer and listened to the Indianapolis 500 on the radio.

There’s only one speedway,
It’s a track of clay,
You ain’t seen nothing,
Til you’ve been to Sante Fe!

Six of us piled into the station wagon Friday afternoon as we drove east on I-80, the back end of the car crowded with sleeping bags, suitcases, and a grocery sack full of games – Hangman, Connect-the-Dots, Tic-tac-Toe, and Bingo, alongside a Coleman cooler filled ice, sandwiches, and fruit for the four hour drive.

Early Saturday morning Uncle Erv drove Mitch and me out to Proviso West High School, the west suburban school sitting opposite

a large cemetery, the track behind the gymnasium shaded by a huge water tower. The sun was just breaching the top of the massive oaks as we walked towards the team camp, dew on the grass making each blade sparkle like a gem.

I was shocked by the number of runners as we approached the stands. Mitch claimed there would be at least ten teams, pointing out high school opponents as they jogged listlessly around the track. He introduced me to my eight teammates, each one eyeballing me like a piece of meat, trying to decide whether I was a champ or a chump.

“This is Jim Gatens, my cousin that I told you about from Iowa City.”

I shook outstretched hands. Coach Gummerson stepped up and extended a hand, giving me a red singlet festooned with the 24-hour Relay logo. We found a spot under the canvas awning behind the bleachers to set our gym bags filled with clean socks, four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, two apples, a box of Girl Scout Thin Mints, and big bag of Jay’s potato chips. Along the edge of the camp were two canvas cots, a collapsible card table with four aluminum lawn chairs, some sleeping bags, and a five-gallon Coleman cooler of water.

Through openings in the wooden bleachers, we could see teams out on the football field burning off nervous energy tossing frisbees back and forth, their voices loud against the chirping of robins and the drone of cicadas in the background. Mitch and I sat in the lawn chairs trying to relax, playing War with a dog-eared set of cards while we waited for the start. A few minutes before seven o’clock the event director blew a whistle and everyone assembled at the starting line.

“We’ll have a checker at the line to keep track of your laps, but I suggest your coach do the same thing. Runners must always have a baton in their hands. If you accidently drop it, pick it up. There won’t be a penalty.” He cleared his throat as a late-comer arrived.

“Any questions? OK, line up and we’ll get started.”

Everyone stood around the starting line, cheering as the eleven took off for the initial leg, a myriad of team colors and designs

streaking around the first corner. Teammates encouraged their friends around the track as they flew down the backstretch in a mad dash, coaches screaming at them to temper enthusiasm.

Coach Gummerson had cautioned us to stay off our feet and find a place to relax so after watching the first two legs Mitch and I went back to our camp to play cards with Tristan. I was in the tenth spot, right after Mitch. It was going to be a long day.

When we exchanged the baton in the afternoon, the sub five-minute pace that had initially seemed so easy was becoming more of a grind. Someone turned on a transiter radio and we listened to Lou Boudreau's play-by-play on WGN radio while we glimpsed through the bleachers at runners circling the track.

At suppertime, with fifteen miles behind us, a lethargy hung over every runner like a weary fog, each team camp deathly quiet. There were more 5:15 miles from our teammates, although Mitch and I consistently kept ours under five minutes. By 10pm, the fifty-minute naps and junk food snacks were no longer enough to keep us going strong. The excitement we felt fifteen hours ago was long gone. The next five hours passed slowly.

"What time is it?" I mumbled as Mitch shook my shoulder.

"It's around 2am. I'm up in about two or three minutes. Stick your head under the hose. It will wake you up. Make sure you get Tristan up" He nodded at a blanket. "Before you head to the start." He watched to make sure I was standing before he left for the exchange zone.

Seven other teammates laid on the cots or on top of sleeping bags spread out on the ground. No one stirred. I couldn't remember how many miles I'd done. It had to be over twenty. I was more awake after dousing myself with the water but knew it wouldn't make me run any faster. I was plain tired. The kind of fatigue you feel after a hilly twelve-mile run on a steamy hot summer day. I kept repeating that it was almost over, but I was too exhausted to be relieved by the thought.

Five hours later I watched the sun illuminate the trees again as I stood under the canvas awning. It buoyed my spirits to know we were almost done, but at this point even one more mile seemed impossible. Coach Gummerson told me I'd completed twenty-five miles as I stepped on the track for the final exchange from Mitch.

When I handed the baton off to Tristan at 6:38am I knew I was done. God was I dead. At 6:55am all participants circled the track giving the anchors a last lackluster hand, too tired for anything more enthusiastic.

Our team finished second, covering 261 miles and some change, but I really didn't care. I was never going to do this again. *Ever*. I shook hands with Coach Gummerson and slapped hands with the guys, then we headed back to the lot to wait for our ride, Mitch and I climbing in the car like a pair of old men.

We stopped at Corky's Drive-in on the way home, sitting on the picnic benches in front as we ate, afraid our odor would kill Uncle Erv. Neither of us said a word as we emptied the tray, eating as quietly as Irish bachelors. I polished off two "Deluxe Corkers", a pair of large fries, and two jumbo RC Colas. We finished the meal with loud burps and jumped in the car.

I crashed on the couch in their basement and woke up after a long sleep, unclear whether it was 9pm or 5am. Neither Mitch nor I went to the Cubs game Sunday afternoon.



Amidst all the war protests around the nation, my running routine continued into July despite days when the challenge of getting through a ten-mile run was intolerable and the urge to stop nearly as uncontrollable as a "bless you" after a sneeze. On these days I berated myself for breaking my routine, yet the rationalizations came as easily as childhood lies.

The daily fatigue from ten miles in the morning followed by mowing lawns in the midday heat was exhausting. I was as worn

down as an old eraser, unable to decide whether a day off was a wise choice or a missed opportunity.

The initial week in July had been an exciting challenge, the ten mile runs a testament to my dedication, but after a week of it, the enormity of the workload grew daunting. Each day I felt like the Greek wrestler Milo carrying the newborn calf, the additional weight of the miles testing my fortitude, worried I couldn't respond to the daily load.

Boredom and fatigue ran rampant, each morning a relentless battle of step after step, a never-ending assault of assembly line miles. Every waking moment I questioned my sanity, wondering if all this was worth the effort. If not for Clancy and the constant thought of the talent I would be facing, I'm not sure I could have maintained the workload.

The Vietnam War demonstrations still simmered on campus during the summer. Two more East High grads died over the past month in southeast Asia and we all knew of others fighting there now. The raw passions created an ugliness between the right and left, dividing the country as it had during the Civil War.

In the latest Gallup Poll, fifty-six percent of Americans believed the US made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam. CBS news host Walter Cronkite reported almost 40,000 Americans had been killed in the last three years. Stephen Stills' a cappella song "Find the Cost of Freedom" expressed the thoughts of America's youth.



By the end of July, I was pleased to see the daily miles, which hadn't been noteworthy in June, were now significant. It provided the measure of relief I needed to continue running despite the daily monotony which dulled my resolve.

The first week in August I surpassed six-hundred-fifty miles and I still had three weeks before school began after Labor Day. I was dying for the summer to end, to get my career started and run with my new teammates. Yet as I stood in the on deck circle, the

realization I would be in the batter's box soon stole my courage. Made me question my resolve.

I wanted time to slow down, to wait just a bit more for college to begin and give me one last chance to hold on to the comforts of high school. But like a stopwatch, time slowed for no one. Clancy was leaving for Kansas State on August 15th, Sunday's run our last hurrah. I had run with Ray for three years, watching his growth as a runner, sharing the ups and downs of high school; the thrilling wins and the agonizing losses.

Though we tried to pretend today's twelve-mile run was like any other, both of us were aware of what it meant. Afterwards we stood alongside the Statue of Liberty at East High, unable to say what we felt, hoping the other would broach the awkwardness. I couldn't extend the moment any longer.

"Well. I'll miss you brother." We shook hands a bit longer than normal, avoiding each other's eyes. I nodded and raised a fist. "Go Wildcats."

"See ya Jim." Clancy smiled.

I looked over my shoulder and waved as he drove away, staring at the sidewalk as I shuffled down College Street. Practice started in ten days. I prayed I was ready.

Chapter 2

May 26, 2002

It was odd to start summer training alone. For the past two and a half years Coach Kozak had been there every step of the way. He was my drill sergeant and my counselor at Grange High. My trainer and my confidant, teaching me when to step on the gas and when to hit the brakes. It would be tough to train without him. He taught me that patience can be a virtue, but that throwing caution to the wind can be just as effective. Without his brains, I wouldn't have had enough brawn to win the three state titles. Now all the work had to be done alone.

I opened the email from Iowa's Coach Wiznewski and reread the mileage attachment, anxious to get started on a new venture. As many miles as I put in last summer, these college numbers were a huge step into an arena filled with athletes far beyond my current prowess. I read the attachment again and then stared out the bedroom window deep in thought, the reality of great expectation weighing heavily on my mind.

It was hard not to wonder if I might have reached too far, let my ego and dreams run too unfettered. Wiz reminded freshmen to recalibrate minds and bodies, to think like a college runner and leave the past behind. I sighed, not wanting to acknowledge the truth of his words. Going from the top of the heap to the bottom didn't sound all that exciting.

My body shimmied as I closed the attachment, thoughts alternating between concern and confidence. The responsibility for success

was thrust on my narrow shoulders, the load far heavier than any I'd anticipated, and seemingly beyond my current capabilities. The first day of practice I was expected to show up fit and ready to race, to produce times in workouts I'd never run before. It was clear what I needed to do next.

I could smell the coffee as I walked downstairs towards the kitchen. Dad was reading the Saturday newspaper.

"Run in any place that has soft surfaces, you know, gravel or dirt, and one or two areas within fifteen minutes that have lots of hills. Stay off sidewalks. Cement is too unforgiving, especially when you are running eighty and ninety mile weeks." Dad drained the cup. "Plan on a nap in the afternoon after soccer camp and ice baths once each week. The first three weeks you're going to be tired, and I promise your legs are going to be sore, so heed my advice." I nodded.

"Should I stick with one workout each day or start with doubles?" I leaned at dad.

"I think you have enough miles under your belt. Go with singles."

"Thanks." I sat there for a moment, absorbing his input, then stood and grinned sheepishly. "Can I use your credit card for some shoes at Dick Pond Athletics?"



On many summer run I thought of Marie and how tough it was going to be to be away from her in ten weeks, our only connection the phone and emails. My girlfriend was going to the University of Michigan and I was going to the University of Iowa. I fretted on the reality daily, the steady march towards separation frightening. Losing her...well, I didn't want to think about it.

We talked about going up to the Wisconsin Dells for a weekend in July as we drove into the city for a Memorial Day game against the Padres.

"We went up last year for a team weekend." Traffic slowed as we neared Comiskey Park. "Maybe we can do some hiking. And

the water park. I need my fill of adrenalin. I could ride the 'Black Anaconda' all day."

"Yeah, that'd be cool. I'll mention it to my parents to see if I can have the car." We pulled into Lot G near the park.

"When do you have Orientation?" Marie asked. "I've scheduled mine for mid-July."

"Mine's early August. I had to arrange it around soccer camp." I sighed.

The Sox got killed by San Diego 1-9 that afternoon.

After the South-side game we drove up Halsted to Little Italy for an Italian ice at Mario's on Taylor Street, enjoying the atmosphere of Chicago. As we stood along the curb waiting for the brain freeze to go away, Marie pointed across the street at Italian versions of Statler and Waldorf, the two old men smoking cigars on their stoop as they kept an eye on the neighborhood. We laughed as they looked our way.



By the third week of June my average was 78.25 miles, ten miles more than I had ever averaged. But the challenge was daunting. It was a struggle to get more than ten miles before soccer camp, and it was just as tough to split the distance between the morning and the afternoon. How my father handled the same mileage in college while working forty hours a week was beyond me.

Initially, my enthusiasm got me through the eleven and twelve-mile morning runs, but by the fourth week of June, the relentless seventy-five and eighty-five mile weeks wore me down, draining an already overtaxed battery. Some of it was the heat of the summer, some of it being on my feet at the soccer camp, but much of it was simply from a workload I had never attempted.

I was pushed to a breaking point the last Friday of the first month, the four mile afternoon run after ten miles in the morning grinding me down to a nub. Encouraged by dad to take off my first day in four weeks, I felt like a million dollars on Sunday. He dropped me off in the far west suburb of Warrenville for a point-to-point route

on the Prairie Path, six cities later finishing in Elmhurst two blocks south of York High School.

The first half of the workout was a fun adventure as I passed through St. James Farm in the shade of trees, crossing Roosevelt Road by St. Francis High School, relishing the new scenery as the trail meandered north and then east towards my fourteen mile destination.

Running along the Union Pacific West tracks I stared longingly at the Dairy Queen in Wheaton wishing I had some change, the volume of weekend runners increasing as I passed into Glen Ellyn. I climbed over I-355 on the long cement footbridge into the blue collar towns of Lombard and Villa Park, wearily cresting the last bridge spanning Rt. 83 – a hop, skip, and jump from my destination.

Looking up from the newspaper as he heard the faster tempo of my approach, dad smiled and refolded the Sunday *Chicago Tribune*. I grabbed the bottle of water on the bench and laid on the grass in the shade of an oak, squirting a steady stream into my mouth.

After stretching I pulled on a dry DG-10 t-shirt and cargo pants over my running shorts and we walked the block to the Prairie Cafe for breakfast. As I shoveled the food into my human conveyor belt, dad told stories from his college years.

“I remember competing against Prefontaine, I think it was my junior year...”

“You ran against Prefontaine?” I dropped my fork and stared at dad while he nodded.

“Sure. It was at an indoor meet in Portland. One of those banked 176-yard tracks that reminds me of roller derby. Pre was on fire after winning the NCAA Cross Country Meet the previous fall and I was excited to race against him – even though he was far superior to me. Anyway, he led the two-mile from start to finish.” Dad smirked. “He was so aggressive, I seemed to remember him running something like 4:08 for the first mile.”

“MAN, he was hauling!” My eyes were huge.

He nodded. “I thought I was flying. I think I was at 4:19 for the mile but still trailing the pack.”

“Dang!” I was shocked to hear his words. “How fast did Pre run?”

“8:22. An American Record. He kicked my butt. In fact, he passed me right at the finish line and I still had a lap to go.”

“What?” Dad nodded as he sighed. “How fast did you run?”

“8:47.1.” He glanced out the window while he shook his head. “Even though I got lapped, it was the best two-mile of my career.” He paused and continued, staring at my plate as he recalled the moment.

“Pre was larger than life. A redwood among pines. His death haunted me. Our generation lost something that day.” Dad smiled wistfully. “You know, like the Don McLean song. And to be honest, it still haunts me today.”

“That’s cool to think you ran against Pre.” I shoved the last of the pancakes into my mouth. “Did you talk with him?”

“Yeah. I’m kind of embarrassed to admit it, but I did. He shook my hand after the race and told me he wanted to see if he could catch me before the line. That I was his motivation the last lap. So in a way, I guess I helped him break the American Record.”

“That’s so cool.” I smiled.

“Yeah.” He grimaced. “A year later he was dead.”



July 4th was on Thursday and there was no soccer camp on Friday, so we organized a family trip to Galena, an early celebration of mom’s 48th birthday and an opportunity to spend time together. After her battle with cancer eighteen months ago, it was wonderful to be able to share time with her.

We lined Main Street for the small downtown parade – waving enthusiastically at the float with the queen in the convertible, the clown on stilts, and the old men in their 60’s cars. It felt like we were in Mayberry. Later that evening we watched fireworks from lounge chairs on the roof of the DeSoto House Hotel, the four of us side by side as we “oohed and aahed” at the blasts of colors above.

But for as much fun as we had, the most enjoyable experience was Friday evening at the karaoke bar in Galena. At a young age

mom taught us to sing together so we had no problem in front of a crowd. Julie and I led off with our John Travolta/Olivia Newton-John rendition of “You’re the One that I Want”, only dad and mom clapping with any enthusiasm at our effort.

Seconds later my parents replaced us on the stage with a Carly Simon/James Taylor duet of “Mockingbird”, the small crowd breaking into applause at mom’s strong vocals. They began to sit down but I jumped up and grabbed her hand, taking mom back up to the stage, the small audience clapping in a rhythmic beat while she chose a song. I held her hand for support and then stood in the wings as she sang a soulful version of Joni Mitchell’s, “For Free”.

The soft spotlight showed the struggle and the pain of the last two years on her face, all of her being invested in each note. She followed with Patsy Cline’s “Crazy”, the patrons rising to their feet on the last note, their appreciation bringing tears to her eyes.

She bowed to the crowd, acknowledging their support with hands over her heart, a couple holding up lighters as I kissed her on the cheek and led her off stage. Dad stood and held out his hand as she approached our table, twirling her in a circle and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her in tight for a kiss. Mom beamed; her face transformed as though she was twenty years old again.

Later, we strolled back to the hotel singing songs she taught us years ago, my sister and mother skipping arm-in-arm down the sidewalk towards the DeSoto House like LaVern and Shirley, dad and I smiling at our good fortune. I wished I could capture the evening in a bottle, but as writer Norman Maclean stated so well, “life is not a work of art, and that moment could not last.” Sadly, he was right.

On Sunday I turned in one of my fastest loops at Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve, flying by swarms of middle-aged runners and high school kids like they were standing still. I had never broken fifty-four minutes for the 9.7 miles and yet I did today. Whether it was the cathartic effect of the weekend, or simply that I only ran eight miles on Saturday, I really didn’t know. Regardless, it gave me hope my miles were paying off.

I grabbed a water bottle out of the back seat and wiped the sweat off my face as I swallowed the twenty ounces in one continuous swig. Stretching on the pavement in an open spot beside my car, I listened to chirping cicadas, glancing up as a figure approached me with a big smile. It was one of my former high school rivals. Dan Glatz.

The conversation quickly moved to college running, and how he was doing.

“How was your first year at Ohio State?” What a dumb question. I bet he had been asked that a million times.

“Great.” He smiled ruefully. “Though the first month of school, I was clueless. I thought I was going to ace all my classes and grab the #1 spot on the cross country team. NOT!” He smirked. “I soon found out different. The professors didn’t really care about teaching and I definitely overestimated my impact on the team.”

“Yeah, I heard the transition is pretty tough.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Eight o’clock classes sucked, especially after a four to five-miles each morning. I had to get up at 6:15 to fit it in, throw down some food, and then hustle to class. By the end of September, I was exhausted from the miles and the hours of study – trying to burn the candle at both ends.”

“Did it affect your grades? Mom is really harping on a balance between studies and running. I’m a little nervous. The increase in miles is already killing me and school hasn’t even started.”

“That’s where the trouble began.” Glatz pursed his lips. “After the first month I was so tired all I wanted to do was sleep. There didn’t seem to be enough hours in a day to get everything done.”

“Sounds tough.” His words made me nervous. “What advice would you give? I mean, so I don’t screw up...” I grimaced at my faux pas. “Sorry, no offense.”

“Don’t worry, I understand what you mean. Don’t, and I mean don’t, take any 8am classes. You need your sleep. Even if you have already signed up for an eight o’clock class, you can change it the first week. And make sure you do.”

He paused as we watched a marathon group from Team in Training shuffle by like a throng of tourists in the Loop.

“Focus on getting at least 8 hours of sleep at night and keep your classes in the middle of the day, even if they’re back to back. And I’d try to get in a nap if possible. All I remember of my freshman year is fatigue.” He paused. “Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t completely suck, but if I knew then what I know now...well.”

We shook sweaty hands and parted ways. I crept towards the car like an eighty year old behind a walker, pulling a dry t-shirt over my head, going over what Glatz had said. Despite all my work, the approach of college made me nervous. I stared at the yellow line on Cass Ave. as I drove home lost in thought, worried about the obstacles and adversity I would face ahead.

After my shower, I sat down at the kitchen table absent-mindedly pouring a second bowl of cereal, absorbed in an article in the newspaper. The story from a *Boston Globe* writer revealed a widespread sexual abuse scandal by Catholic priests over the previous thirty years. Almost 800 children were violated, both in the Boston area and around the nation.

When dad saw what I was reading he went on a five minute rant about the conspiracy of the Catholic hierarchy to protect their image. I was shocked at his vehemence. He was raised a Catholic, but never said a word about religion and never asked me to go to church. I had obviously touched a sore spot. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know why.



The idea for the race blossomed at a block party on our street while we watched a pair of junior high kids take on our neighbors in a game of “Bag Toss”.

“Whenever I see this game it makes me think of Jarts.” Uncle Andy chuckled. “You remember when Stevie Butler got hit by one and it left a dent in his forehead?” They both laughed at the memory.

"Yeah, I seem to remember Mitch got hit by one also." Uncle Andy nodded.

"Is he the one you ran a marathon with?" I asked. Dad smiled.

"Yep. He's our cousin", pointing back and forth from him to Andy. "Mitch and I ran it after my freshman year at Iowa. It was up in northern Wisconsin." His face lit up. "Mitch always came up with some summer races over the years." He took a sip of beer. "Lots of Finnish immigrants live in that part of the state. It was the Paavo Nurmi Marathon, named after a Finnish runner from the 1920's. He won 9 Olympic Gold medals." Dad took another sip of the Goose Island beer.

"I took a train into Chicago and then we drove six hours up to Hurley on Friday. It's a small town near Lake Superior. We stayed overnight with a family in Ironwood and then ran the race on Saturday. It was so much fun. There was a torch lighting ceremony on the first night and then some type of Finnish polka on Main Street. One of the women grabbed Mitch and got him to dance. He was so embarrassed." Dad grabbed a handful of nachos, smiling at the memory.

"Saturday morning, they bused us to the starting line in Upton, I think that's the name, and then we ran the twenty-six miles back to Hurley. We started at about a 6:15 pace, and then I picked it up because I wanted to break 2:40." Dad grimaced. "But I died and ended up running 2:50. I passed ten miles at just over an hour and twenty miles at just under two hours, but within two miles I hit the Wall. The last four miles seemed like they would never end. They were the longest four miles of my life." He shook his head and smiled despite what should have been a painful memory.

"Despite all the pain I had a great time."



We were both excited about the trip to Hurley to run the Paavo Nurmi Half Marathon the first week of August. Dad jumped on my suggestion about returning to northern Wisconsin like a Saturday

morning cowboy leaping atop his horse. He was thrilled to relive one of the best experiences of his life.

I listened quietly as he talked about training and tactics all the way up, cataloging his tips for my years ahead. I worried the town wouldn't have the same charm he described, but when we pulled onto the main street of downtown Hurley I could tell by his expression it was the same.

"Poor John's Cafe." Dad smiled as he pointed at the restaurant like a little kid in an I spy game. "I knew it was something with John in it."

That evening we enjoyed the spaghetti dinner, discussing the many luxuries not available thirty-three years earlier. I only had to run 13.1 miles and not 26.2. I slept in an air conditioned bedroom and not on a cot on the porch. I wore top notch racing flats, had a wrist-watch which provided splits and computer access to a topographical map of the course. I even had water every mile and an aid station every two to three miles. Dad claimed I would have a support team if he could locate a bike.

As the pasta digested, we discussed my plan.

"My goal is to run 1:12." A runner walked by with an ice cream cone. I looked down the street for the source.

"OK, let's break it down. A 1:12, is a 5:30 pace, so you might as well get right to it." He always surprised me how quickly he figured splits. "Even if you struggle a bit at the end, this gives you some cushion."

Saturday morning, I rode the school bus to the starting line in Gile while dad went in search of a bicycle, hoping to ride beside me as a pit crew. I looked up and down the streets of the tiny town as I warmed up, many of the participants clad in orange shirts from previous years.

None of them had that look – the shallow cheekbones, underdeveloped chest and wash-board abs that gave me pause, unless they were hiding in a portable toilet. I was going to have to do the work by myself.

Despite hills, I rang up 5:30's on the initial miles like an adding machine, my pace so steady I could have pointed to where the distance markers should be located. I wasn't the least bit surprised to see 27:32 on the five mile clock as I ran along the small lake, disappointed there wasn't a breeze off the water to cool me down.

The early morning temperatures and high humidity left dew thick on the grass, the sun filling the sky as I ran southward, sweat rolling off my face and elbows in steady streams as I notched seven miles. Dad still hadn't shown up. The solitary running was getting tiresome.

I ran by pajamaed kids watching from camp chairs along the course, an occasional dog barking from the back yard, the lead police car fifty yards ahead my only company. It would have been nice to have some competition to give me something to focus on. Anything other than my growing fatigue.

At Hwy 51 the course turned to the north for the last five mile stretch into the finish. The thought of another twenty-eight minutes of this tempo was suddenly daunting. A shout over my shoulder pulled me from my reverie. I smiled at the figure of dad atop a bicycle far too small for his tall frame, the effect like a clown on a tiny circus bike. He pulled up alongside, handing me a water bottle.

"How you feeling?"

"Honestly, not too bad. Although that last hill was rough. And I'm starting to get bored, so your timing is perfect. The last three miles will be a grind, especially the climb into town, but I still think a 1:12 is realistic."

"I can only hope you finish stronger than I did." Dad grinned.

When I hit ten miles at 55:41, I knew it was in the bag, even though the hills made my legs feel like blocks of cement. The final climb near the twelve mile mark was burdensome, but dad's constant banter kept me on task.

I leaned into the left turn at Silver Street, the finish banner appearing in the distance like a desert oasis, relief washing over my weary body with the end in sight. Two more blocks.

The announcer's voice echoed off the downtown buildings, the sound of applause increasing in intensity as the line approached. I pumped my fist the last fifty meters and raised my arms as I ran through the finish tape, happy with the 1:12.55 on the clock. Dad was so excited he nearly crashed the bike at the back of the chutes, jumping off the two-wheeler like a foregone Pony Express rider.

"Awesome. That was so awesome. Congratulations." Dad put his arm around my shoulder. "Let's get some Mojakka!"

I'd barely caught my breath and he was already diving into his past. I was looking forward to my future. Cross country began in ten days.

Chapter 3

September 2, 1970

The first day of cross country practice, Coach Cretzmeyer led the three freshmen over to the equipment room to get our practice gear and lockers. We each filled out a 5"x7" card with our name, campus address, the issued workout clothing, our locker number with the combination at the top.

The University of Iowa equipment manager, Ron Fairchild eyeballed us with the same contempt he would have had for a dog turd in the back yard. About 5'9", 225 lbs. he sported an old fashioned flat-top and an unlit cigar in the corner of his mouth. He explained the procedure.

"Line up and we'll get you practice sweats. Let me know if you need smalls or mediums." Then he glared at us and added. "And I'd better get them back in June." After everyone tried on the gray sweatshirt and sweatpants, he resumed.

"Each of you grab a roll." He pointed to the laundry basket. "Every day after practice you will lay out your towel and roll your jock, socks, t-shirt, and shorts into it and put the roll in the top of your locker." He shifted the cigar to the other side of his mouth.

"If I don't see a roll in the top of your locker when I change them each day then you don't get a clean one." He glared at each one of us. "Any questions?"

I meekly raised my hand. He nodded at me with a scowl on his face.

"How will you know what size we wear in the t-shirt and shorts?"

“Don’t worry. I guarantee it will fit.” He smirked.

We grabbed our rolls and quickly changed while the rest of the team waited on the benches.

“I see Ronnie got the perfect sizes for all the newcomers.” Cretz laughed as he handed each freshman a new pair of Adidas Italias in unopened royal blue boxes. The whites of my eyes doubled in size. He continued as I reverently pulled out the shoes and laced them up.

“What you guys fail to realize is that the shirts and shorts have to fit the football team also.”

Cretz laughed as Arnie Bontrager’s shorts fell off his hips when he stood to grab the shoebox. At least ours stayed up. I tossed my beat up Adidas Gazelles into the bottom of the locker and put on the new Italias.

“Morrison, get Arnie a roll of tape.”

My t-shirt hung down to mid-thigh, almost too long for a mini-skirt. Morrison came back with a roll of athletic tape and wound it around Arnie’s waistband like he was wrapping a mummy. He ripped the tape and stood back to admire the work. With a lot of yucks from the team and a thumbs up from Arnie, Dave Eastman led us out the door for our first workout.

I glanced down at my new Adidas Italias and smiled like a proud five year old as we circled around the Quonset huts behind the football stadium. Arnie, Wayne, and I trailed the team like newborn ducks, worried by our first outing.

I was still trying to digest the workout Cretz posted on the bulletin board. Five times a mile at 4:50-54. I was excited but nervous as eleven of us jogged on the Melrose Ave sidewalk out to Finkbine Golf Course. Louie Foster pointed and chuckled as a University Heights cop handed a speeding ticket to a clueless student in a VW Bug idling along the curb. My thoughts were only on the intervals.

I got through three in the assigned times, albeit between 4:52 and 4:55, but only by giving an A+ effort on every repeat. It was clear a fourth under 5:00 wasn’t in the stars. If it had been on flat terrain, maybe, but with loops which included a 300-yard climb it was sure

as shit and taxes that another fast one would be impossible. Cretz motioned to the three freshmen before we started the fourth one.

“Wayne, Jim, Arnie. You three jog to the eighteenth tee and back instead of jumping in with the guys. I can tell you’re tired. We’ll give you a longer break and then you can rejoin them on the fifth one.”

“I think...” Cretz cut me off. He smiled.

“Trust me.”

He was right. We watched Dave Eastman, my former East High teammate, lead the rest of the team through a 4:47 on number four. It was a good thing I didn’t try. I beat Wayne and Arnie on the fifth one, but my 5:09 wasn’t much to brag about. The two mile cool down took forever, the three freshmen quiet as Dave ranted about President Nixon on the way back to the Recreation Building.

I sat on the bench next to Wayne staring at the royal blue carpet, elbows resting on my knees.

“Are you as tired as I am?”

“More.” Wayne sighed. “I didn’t include enough hill work this summer and it showed today. I was only a couple of steps behind you on the last one, but I had to give it everything just to run a 5:10.”

Arnie stood up and unwrapped the athletic tape from around his waist, rolled it into a ball and missed badly on an attempt to hit the wastebasket. He was so tired he just stared at the wad on the carpet as he spoke.

“Yeah, we seldom ran more than five or six miles in high school. With the warmup and cool down, and the jog between, we probably ran ten miles today.” He got up and dropped the errant throw in the basket. “Boy am I glad we don’t have a meet for two weeks. The hills crushed my confidence.”

“Cretz said Northern Illinois was average and their course flat, so we don’t have to worry about the first meet.” Wayne sighed. “But to be honest, I’m worried about every meet.”

“Let’s get a shower and head over to the dining hall.” Arnie grinned. “I’m starved!”

We talked about classes as the three of us walked to the dining hall in the Quadrangle. Even though I was less than successful today, it felt good to get the first workout under my belt. I didn't hit a home run; probably just a bunt single to be honest, but at least I didn't get any glares from the upper classmen. And if you had asked me before practice, I would have been pleased with the three that were on pace, even beating two of the seniors on the last one.

After dinner I stopped by Morrison's dorm room to talk about today's practice. The sophomore from Canada laughed at my concerns.

"Cretz always gives us that workout the first day to let the rookies know you are no longer in high school. So, if you came out wondering if you can handle college running, don't worry. He plans it that way."

"Yeah, but I did more running this summer than ever before." I glanced at the Jackson 5 album cover leaning against a speaker, amused by their giant Afros. "I thought I'd have a better showing. I stunk."

"Don't worry. We all stink as freshmen. This is the Big Ten, not the Iowa College Conference. We have all-Americans and conference champs in dual meets. Most ICC runners are happy running a 5:30 pace. Even the worst guy on our team could eat them for lunch."

"God, do I have my work cut out." I stared at Rachel Welsh's cleavage on the 'One Million Years BC' poster over his desk. "Well, gotta go. Wayne, Arnie, and I are meeting tomorrow morning at seven for a thirty minute run. We'll stop over before we head out."

"See you then."

As I walked out of the room he turned up the volume. I could hear Morrison singing to the record – "It's as easy as one-two-three..."



It was wonderful to reunite with Dave Eastman after a two year hiatus. Although I had come into my own junior and senior years at East High, I wouldn't have gotten to that point without his

encouragement. The disaster at Waterloo Columbus my sophomore year almost ended my career, but he was there that day to pick up the pieces.

Although only a junior, Dave continued to provide the leadership for this team despite the two seniors who rightfully should have been in charge. It was weird dynamic, but I was too new to be involved in any power struggle, only concerned about getting through the daily workouts.

I became fast friends with Wayne Sanders, my new roommate, having raced against him many times in the big high school meets, the pair of us never more than two places apart the five times we raced in the State Meet head to head. His unpretentious demeanor and scholarly attitude made him the perfect roommate for a guy who needed lots of tutoring.

On the other hand, there was Arnie Bontrager. A quiet unknown from northwest Iowa, he had never qualified for the State Meet in cross country (he claimed to be on the football team) and was only average in track, never breaking ten minutes for the two-mile. At times I questioned why Cretz let him on the team, but his daily toughness and work ethic proved his worth.

On a steamy Sunday morning in early September, the team met at Dave and Bob's apartment for our weekly long run. Sweat was already dripping from my brow after the half mile jog from the dorms. It had to be eighty degrees. Twelve miles had been my longest run in high school, but Morrison claimed we would run fifteen today.

I swallowed water from the hose and held it up to see if anyone else wanted a drink, my stomach tied in knots while I waited. Dave looked at his watch and nodded at Bob, the rest of the team balling up t-shirts and flipping them on the bushes as we shuffled towards the sidewalk. Three rookies followed the eight as we jogged east on Burlington and up the hill towards Dodge Street.

Anyone who thinks Iowa is flat is full of shit. We climbed two long hills before we had been gone ten minutes, sweat dripping steadily from arms and legs in a constant rhythm. Having grown up in Iowa

City, I was painfully aware of the tough climbs ahead but guessed Arnie and Wayne would soon find out.

Over Interstate-80 and around a big turn by a white clapboard farmhouse, the team glanced across at the deep hollow glaciers cut ten thousand years ago. Conversation slowed to a crawl as we ran up yet another big hill on the way to the dam.

Three miles later we crested the final climb to the quarter-mile vista across the Coralville Dam, heavy breathing continuing even though it was flat, sweat glistening on torsos as though we were slathered in baby oil. It was killing me to maintain the seven-minute pace after all the hills, but I'd be damned if I gave in. I glanced down the steep decline into the spillway, knowing what the other freshmen didn't; that there was a killer climb on the other side. And that the next five or six minutes were going to be hell.

The spillway was dry as a bone, huge rocks heavier than any of us could lift lay scattered throughout the channel, a testament to the power of water. From this low point we would climb for two-thirds of a mile, weaving back and forth past the parking lot to the public beach, a campground dotted with tents, and the red and white striped Dairy Sweet stand where I'd enjoyed many an ice cream cone.

The pack separated by the time we got to the first lot, eleven runners strung out in twos and threes, each athlete enduring the relentless suffering of the climb. We must have been a pitiful site to watch as we made feeble progress up the long incline. I stared at the asphalt, sneaking occasional peeks ahead to convince myself I was still moving.

By the time we got to the crest of the hill Dave and Bob were no longer in sight, the juniors speeding down Dubuque Street on the six mile stretch towards home. Morrison, Jerry, and Butch had two hundred yards on Louie, Wayne, and I, the rest of the squad only muffled breathing behind. The climb off the spillway had broken most of us, fatigue the victor in the battle of wills.

I had no recollection of the last four miles, only a staggering fatigue as the three of us worked side by side borrowing courage from

each other to get home. From half a block away I spotted Morrison's reddish blond hair, his trunk horizontal, holding the hose over his head, water cascading off his chin and shoulders as he savored the cool relief. Bob grabbed the hose from him and sprayed us as we approached, the stream of water a welcome treat after ninety-nine minutes of unbearable heat.

Dave turned and smiled as Wayne and I slowed to a stop, sticking out a hand for us to slap, his simple action feeling like we'd been knighted. Arnie and Louie shuffled in a few minutes later, their eyes set deep in hollowed sockets. Our two seniors, Owen and Rich, were the last two in.

Wayne and I dropped to the ground in the shade of the building on a narrow stretch of grass, staring above as clouds drifted overhead, too tired to speak. If I died right now, I would have been a happy man. I finally rolled over on my hands and knees to get to my feet, staggering towards Bob so I could take a long drink from the hose. I must have lost ten pounds of sweat.

We said our goodbyes and walked back to Hillcrest using dry t-shirts to wipe sweat and salt from eyes, far too tired and stiff to think about jogging the four blocks. I was lost in thought, mesmerized by the brown water passing under the Burlington Street bridge, praying this challenging run would one day be easy.



The first meet with Northern Illinois was supposed to be a low-key one, the course rumored to be flat and fast. Cretz drove the ten of us out to DeKalb in a van, a few of us underling phrases in textbooks, others reading *CliffsNotes* to save time in English class.

During the run-through on the course, I continually glanced down at my gold shorts with the black piping, smiling at the new reality. Black and gold. I was a Hawkeye. *Cool*.

The juniors led the team through the mile loops to familiarize us with the layout and then Cretz pulled us together afterwards to talk about what to expect tomorrow. We drove back to the Union

for a shower and then dinner. It was exciting to stay in a hotel and go out to a restaurant for a meal. I could count on my fingers of one hand the number of times I'd done either.

We defeated the Huskies with six of the Hawkeyes, including Wayne and me in the top eleven. My 20:25 on the flat four-mile course was a little discouraging, especially because I had worked so hard this past summer. I was looking forward to some impressive times, but this certainly didn't qualify. We stopped to eat before we left Dekalb and I slept the rest of the way home, a nagging disappointment my last thought before I dozed.

I talked with Coach Cretzmeyer after Monday's practice, discouraged with my NIU race.

"Gosh Cretz, I ran 9:26 in cross country last fall and a 4:16 in the mile. I expected I could run a sub 20:00. I mean, a five-minute pace should have been simple on NIU's course." He listened patiently and then answered.

"I know how disappointed you are, but remember, we have had some very tough training the first couple of weeks. For you to think a five-minute pace was going to be easy is unrealistic."

"Well, I didn't expect to run 4:45's the whole way but ..." He heard enough. He cut me off before I could say more, a little impatient with me.

"Listen, have you trained hard?"

"Yes." I said a little too sharply. I was frustrated.

"Did you race as hard as you could?"

"Yes, but..."

"OK, just keep doing that and it will pay off. Just don't expect it to happen overnight. It takes time. Lots of miles. Be patient. I'm pleased with your progress. Keep doing all the right things."

I left Cretz's office feeling a little better, but also knew if my race at Illinois wasn't significantly better, I would be pissed.

The initial ease of classes changed dramatically as we entered the fourth week of the semester. Lab papers were due, quizzes and tests

imminent, my lackluster attitude leaving me with a dread I could no longer ignore. The last straw was a three-page English paper full of red marks. If I didn't get my ass in gear, I would have nightmares about a work shirt with my name stitched over the pocket.

Frantic, I called Margie after supper and asked if I could stop by. She was the Brainiac of my family. I was the jock. College schoolwork far exceeded anything I'd encountered in high school and I knew I needed help. And now. I plopped down on her couch, tired from the tough workout, eyes cast to the floor.

"How many classes have you missed?" I looked up and smiled sheepishly.

"Not too many."

"Baloney." She glared at me. "That's the fastest way to flunk out. You have to promise me you won't miss another class, or I won't work with you."

"Yeah, but I'm dead from all the training." I sighed. "I gotta get my rest."

"Doesn't matter. If you don't pass twelve hours you will lose your scholarship. Is that what you want?"

"I...I... No. Tell me what I need to do. Please help me." She could hear the desperation.

"OK." Her demeanor softened. "Here's what we need to do."

We spent the next fifteen minutes going over the do's and don'ts of college and established times I was to come to her apartment to study. I was a little beaten down by her demands but knew I had no choice.

She promised to help me writing papers and labs, her area of expertise, and she insisted I make flashcards for Biology and Psychology. When I started to object, it only took a glance for me to concede to her demand. I walked back to the dorms with a load lifted off my shoulders, stopping at Osco Drugs to pick up notecards and a felt pen.



As we warmed up on the Illini course late Friday afternoon, I could feel the first signs of fall in the air, a cool breeze drifting in from the north accompanied by long shadows that stretched into the distance. I was relieved to see the Savoy course was as flat as a pancake, the grass freshly mowed and the ground baked hard from the summer heat.

Saturday morning, I was unusually nervous on the ten-minute shake-out run from the hotel, the reality of my first Big Ten competition more than I could get my head around. After an unusually light breakfast because of nerves, I laid on the bed staring at the ceiling, worried I would get my ass kicked today.

My mood didn't improve on the drive to the course. Wayne was just as taciturn. In an hour I would be facing some of the best in collegiate runners in the Midwest. *Why didn't I put in more miles last summer?* I could only hope I proved myself to be a worthy opponent, but...

We got beat in the dual 25-30, but I ran 25:25 on the five mile course. It was a time that gave me hope. Wayne and I followed the pack through three miles, but when Dave and Bob took off after the top Illini runners, our team strung out like a strand of spaghetti. Their move broke my resolve in the snap of fingers, the final two miles a torturous test of my willpower. My body cried out to stop as the runners pulled away, the mental pain hurting as much as the physical. At least I finished as our top freshman.

Owen and Rich warmed down by themselves while the rest of the team followed Dave and Bob around the perimeter of the Savoy course. Up at the front all I heard was grumbling from the two juniors, but soon after Dave pulled to the side of our group as we jogged parallel to Hwy 45.

He spoke with a fury in his voice I didn't recognize.

"I'm so fuckin' pissed at those guys. They're seniors, but it's obvious they didn't put in miles this summer." He glared in their direction. "If they don't want to work hard, then they should quit." Bob nodded and jumped in.

"Dave and I are going to talk with Cretz when we get back to campus." Bob looked over his shoulder and continued. "You expect leadership and hard work from seniors. They aren't doing shit."

"We could have been a decent team if they had worked hard, but they didn't, and they're pulling us down. Illinois is good, but not that good." Dave spit. "We could beat them, but it's never going to happen if those two don't pull their weight." Dave glanced at me. "No offense Jim, but neither you nor Wayne should be our sixth man. Hell, I wasn't even in the top seven as a freshman. And we only finished sixth at the Big Ten Meet. Something's gotta change."

The rest of the way it was quiet, everyone digesting what he said. Dave and Bob continued talking up at the front of our pack, none of us willing to intrude on the discussion. I could tell Wayne was as shocked as me. For a pair of juniors to yell about a pair of seniors was unheard of. It made me realize how serious these two were and what team success meant to them.

They wouldn't tolerate laziness or a lack of discipline. Bob and Dave were only two years older but had everyone's respect. We took what they said to heart, trying to impress them rather than the two seniors. They busted their butts every day and expected nothing less from us. I hoped they didn't think I was lazy or uncommitted, yet years of a Catholic upbringing always left doubt in my mind.

Sunday morning, neither Rich nor Owen showed up for the team run. We draped shirts over the front railing of Dave's stairs, others tossing them on the bushes as nine of us headed up Dubuque Street towards the Coralville Dam. I was still tired from Saturday's race. My legs felt like they had been put through a ringer, the calves sore despite the flat course.

For some reason today had a different feel. As though yesterday's talk had broken the bad juju, positive vibes flowing after the

words of our juniors. Today there was lots of encouragement. Lots of banter. Lots of effort. We did a fantastic job over the fifteen miles and finished with contented looks on faces.

On Monday, we did sixty minutes of "Indian File" on the Finkbine golf course on one of those hot summer days that made me long for fifty degrees and the cool breezes of late October. I was stiff as a board on my morning run but felt much better as we headed out on our ten minute warmup in the afternoon.

I could feel the tension in the air as we quietly stretched beside the club house, yesterday's absence of the two seniors the cause. Dave and Bob were cool to them, making a point to pull the freshmen and sophomores into their conversation to cement leadership roles.

There were eleven of us in the group as we took off single file, each sprint about fifty or sixty yards from the back of the line to the front. It felt good to open my stride and then settle back into the six minute pace as we circled the edges of the golf course.

Dave and Bob kept everyone on a good tempo throughout the hour, encouraging each to work hard as we took our spot up front. They challenged us every way, finding hills when we might have avoided them, sprinting hard when it was their turn. Their actions sent a clear message to the team.

I had fond memories of Dave at East High as a fun-loving captain of the team, yet still motivated by a work ethic second to none. But he had changed in our two years apart, adding a fierceness he had never exhibited in high school.

He still had the Steve McQueen coolness which eluded me, a look that attracted all the girls, wearing hair well over his ears and sideburns that didn't please Cretz. Dave dressed mostly in bell bottoms and flannel shirts, spouting anti-Nixon rhetoric and radical ideas on every easy run. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd even smoked marijuana.

"Tricky Dick is lying to Americans. He's bombing the crap out of Laos." Dave paused. "I was at that protest march last April when

they burned down the old Armory and I'll be at the next one. I hate that dickhead!"

"That reminds me." Butch snickered. "I was taking an emergency crap in Macbride Hall last week, and saw graffiti on the bathroom stall that said, 'Dick Nixon, before he dicks you'. I just about died laughing."

"Hey, did you guys see Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland were at the anti-war rally in Valley Forge last weekend." Everyone thought Jane Fonda was hot. "Their group is working with Vietnam veterans to protest the war. It would be really cool if they held a rally here."



Our next meet was up in Minnesota on the Bolstad Golf Course. Morrison told us it was the most challenging one he had run on, but we really didn't appreciate how tough it was going to be.

I had my first ride on an airplane, the ten of us and Cretz tagging along with the football team on their charter into Minneapolis. Our plane left from Cedar Rapids; the same airport my brother arrived at in a coffin from Vietnam. I was subdued in the waiting area, saddened to know two years had passed since that time. Don's memory still hurt.

The race Saturday morning was one of those best forgotten. Though the rain had stopped overnight, the course was still sloppy, everyone running like rookies as the Gophers handily beat us – even without the services of Garry Bjorklund. I was furious before I finished, frustrated with my effort and time. I didn't even break 26:00.

Wayne and I came in together at 26:12, both of us splattered with mud from head to toe, my new white Adidas Meteors repainted in a dull brown. I could never find a comfortable rhythm during the race, disquieted by the wet footing and steep slopes throughout the course. Even the three-quarter inch spikes didn't provide much of a grip, forcing me to navigate each corner like I was running in high-heels.

Our team gravitated in a cluster behind the chute afterward, sharing frustrations as vapor rose off every head.

"It was impossible to follow behind anyone." Bob ranted like a madman. "I paced off Don Timm for a while, but mud was flying off his spikes like a manure spreader. He put so much crap in my face that it felt like I was eating a dirt sandwich." Bob shouted to the heavens. "I fuckin' HATE this course!"

It was hard to take Bob seriously with his face speckled in mud. I covered a smile and looked at Wayne. He nodded and grinned.

"Look at my glasses." Butch held up the black frames. "There was so much mud on them I was blind. I tried to rub the mud off with my jersey, but it only made it worse. I ended up holding them in my hand the last two miles. I couldn't see a damn thing!"

"You should have seen Wayne and me." I added my two bits, suddenly aware how ludicrous we must have looked. "One of the Minnesota guys went down at the bottom of a hill just in front of us and landed on his ass. Instinctively, we each grabbed an arm and pulled him to his feet. It was as if we rehearsed it."

"Fortunately, we beat him." Wayne nodded as he smiled. Dave returned to our cluster.

"Cretz told me they won 26-30." He shook his head. "If Bjorklund had run today, they would have crushed us."

Every head turned as though cued. Our two seniors were 9th and 10th on our team, Cretz motioning them over as they grabbed sweats.

"OK men, enough talking. Get your sweats on. Time to get a cool-down." Cretz pulled the two seniors aside while we headed out.

Sunday morning they failed to show again. While we were waiting on the front steps for Bob to come out of the apartment Dave asked. "Hey, did you guys hear Janis Joplin died?"

Jerry was surprised. "No way. How?"

"I guess it was an overdose. There was a story in *Rolling Stone*." Dave shook his head. "Rock stars are dropping like flies. First Jimi. Now Janis. Bummer."

The first time we had run the Dam route back in early September, only five ran under 1:39. Today eight ran under that mark. Even Arnie did. Afterwards we sat on Dave's apartment steps drinking water from the hose, grateful to wet our whistles even though the liquid tasted a lot like rubber.

The group was gelling. You could sense no one wanted to leave, each enjoying the comradery, the nine wearing our fatigue like soldiers back from the front. From somewhere I got the gumption to stand, did a few trunk twists and four of five toe touches, and then took another sip out of the hose. Though I was dead, today's run put me in a great mood.

I pulled Wayne to his feet and turned towards Arnie and Morrison.

"Let's go guys." I nodded to the others. "See you dudes tomorrow." We must have been a hoot to watch, wobbling the four blocks back to the dorms.



A dual meet with Wisconsin on October 17th and then it was the Big Ten Meet.

I broke 25:45 on the rolling Yahara Hills Golf Course, but it was a post-race event and not my time that made this day memorable.

I stood with Butch, Jerry, Morrison, Louie, and Wayne about twenty yards from the back of the chute sipping on water, talking about how the Badgers ran. I followed Butch's eyes as he frowned when Owen and Rick crossed the finish line, both unconcerned, acting like a pair of clowns. They hadn't broken 28:00. Before he got his popsicle stick, Owen ripped the number off his chest and crumpled it up, laughing as he tossed it to the ground. Rick laughed even louder.

Bob grimaced and then came over to pat me on the back. He slapped my hand when he heard my time.

"Nice job brother!" He turned as Dave rushed at the pair. "That was..."

In that split second, Dave charged at the seniors, anger etched on his face. We turned and watched in shock as he neared the two. Bob broke away in midsentence, sprinting towards the three to stop the confrontation. The whites of my eyes grew as the scene unfolded.

Dave lunged at Rick from behind, grabbed his arms and spun him face down to the ground. I saw the shock on Owen's face the split second before the punch hit him in the jaw. He went down like a sack of potatoes.

We just stood there dumbfounded, uncertain if we had really seen what had just happened. Rick got up quickly, rushing at Dave, but Bob stepped between the two, holding his hands in the air, his chest on the senior's. He worked Rick like a sheep dog, trying to keep the two separated as he danced from side to side. Rick pointed a finger at Dave over the top of Bob's shoulder and continued to scream like a madman.

"You're a fuckin' asshole Eastman. I'm going to kick your ass!"

Until this moment, I never realized how serious Dave was about our team. That he was willing to punch a teammate to get his point across. He always preached we depended on each other and the minute anyone wouldn't give 100% to the team, he was done with the friendship.

We instinctively clustered around Dave as he passed by, his chin notched into his chest as he walked in a trance towards the van. The Wisconsin runners stared in disbelief.

"Whoa...did you see that? Did he just punch his teammate?"

Dave climbed in the side door of the van and sat on the bench seat, leaving the door open. He stared at the floor with his elbows on knees and hands over his temples. I crawled in and sat beside him, quietly closing the door. I didn't know what to say.

Five minutes later Cretz opened the door and told me to step out. He talked with Dave for a few minutes and then opened the door and looked at me.

"Keep an eye on him Jim. I'm going over to see how Owen is doing. The Wisconsin trainer is with him. He finally came to."

It was the quietest ride I've ever experienced. No meal. No radio. No small talk. Nothing. We rode the two and a half hours back home with mud still caked on our legs, each lost in our own thoughts, worried about what was going to happen to Dave. Owen and Rick didn't ride with us back to Iowa City.

I grew as a runner that day, realizing anyone that didn't give it their all, wasn't going to be on our squad. When Cretz stopped in front of the Fieldhouse we crawled out, everyone giving Dave a pat on the shoulder as he shuffled with Bob back towards their apartment.

"See you for the run tomorrow." I shouted to his back.

Even though no one on the team liked the seniors, it was a week before anyone joked about the incident. On Monday there was a photo of Owen on the cross country bulletin board with a shiner around his eye in black magic marker.

Beside it was a picture of Mad Magazine's Alfred E. Newman. "What, me worry?" Sugar Ray Eastman was written underneath. If Dave got in trouble, it must have been minor. He never spoke of the incident and we never saw Owen or Rick again.



No one on the team had been on the Michigan State course, so running at the Big Ten Meet was going to be a new experience. Whether the incident at Wisconsin would have a positive effect or cause an emotional letdown, no one knew. But it united us as a team even though we were a bit subdued on Friday's run-through.

Once the race got underway it was clear the air was out of our balloon.

Minnesota's Garry Bjorklund, who hadn't run in Minneapolis in early October, easily took the individual title with a 24:33 on the sloppy five mile course in East Lansing, while Michigan State shocked Indiana for the team title. Dave had a great race, grabbing 5th with a 24:46 but our team ended up a disappointing seventh. Even though I was our first freshmen, finishing 47th on the rain-soaked course in 25:35 left me with a hollow feeling. That I had a long way to go.

I gave it my best, but it wasn't much in competition this good. Wayne was 49th, and Arnie, who barely qualified for the State Track Meet last spring in high, was 65th. Lackluster results from the freshmen. The poor finish guaranteed Cretz wouldn't take a team to the NCAA Meet, but at least Dave Eastman got invited to see how he fared against the best in the nation.

Our season ended on a bad note, a bitter pill to swallow, yet everyone was proud of the battles we fought and the work invested. All I could do was chalk the race up to experience. I'd faced enough of college competition for now. Time to get back to the miles.

Chapter 4

August 21, 2002

Coach Wiznewski wanted us on Iowa's campus before classes began so we could get started without distraction. I was thrilled to get underway, to find out what I could contribute. The Hurley Half Marathon was the change in routine I desperately needed, but despite the good time it didn't dispel any disquiet about my initial collegiate season.

It was the same anxiety which overwhelmed me my first season of track sophomore year in high school. Despite my highest mileage and the daily support dad provided, I was going into this new venture a little lost, feeling a bit like a novice entered in the Tour de France.

Our family drove into Iowa City with a full mini-van, thrilled about the new experience in Iowa City and the opportunity to be on my own, mom disappointed I wasn't all in on her ideas for decorating our Hillcrest dorm room. That would have to wait until my sister was in college. Instead, the four of us spent an hour shopping at Coral Ridge Mall, buying all those things we had forgotten. On our return, my bed was filled with more bags than had a spot to nest.

We took Craig to Iowa River Power Company for dinner Tuesday evening, mom peppering my new roommate about his family in Mount Prospect. Craig bombarded dad with questions about his running career at Iowa back in the 70's while Julie fawned over my new roommate, her hormones in overdrive.

Our family met for breakfast the next morning at the hotel, afterward holding onto the hugs by the car, finishing with one last pinky

shake from mom, promising I'd study and get lots of rest. I was homesick as they drove away, sighing as I walked towards my room.

The team assembled on the indoor track bleachers Wednesday, each clad in black nylon shorts and a gray t-shirt adorned with "Hawkeyes" on the chest. Freshmen attempted to act like anything but freshmen, but each of the newbies stood out like a sore thumb. We sat quietly at the edges of the group, returning athletes as giddy as a bunch of Friday night drunks.

Coach Wiz quieted us and began.

"Welcome everyone. I'm excited to get started on the season and anxious to see how the newcomers stack up against our veterans." *My exact thought.* "I want to remind everyone," he said glancing at all the freshmen, "that we are here to get an education. It's our #1 priority. But it doesn't mean we can't be great runners too. Because we can. Make these two your top priorities. Create a daily schedule that allows you to do both to your fullest."

What appeared to be a freshman, rushed over to our group, and sat down at the edge. Coach Wiznewski gave him the stink eye and then continued.

"We have fourteen guys on the cross team this fall. Ten veterans and four freshmen. I realize each newcomer thinks you are going to be the Big Ten Freshman of the Year...and I certainly hope one of you is, but the important thing I want to impart on you today is listen to your body. Work hard, but also rest hard. Learn an easy day of rest can be as important as hard training." Coach looked around the group and settled on the captain.

"Steve, what are the three steps of success?"

"Run, run, and run?" He grinned. Everyone smirked. Before he heard more, Coach Wiznewski cut in.

"Training, recovery, improvement. You leave out the hard training, and I guarantee there will be no improvement. But just as important, if you leave out the recovery, there will also be no fast times. This is a reminder to get your sleep and make sure recovery days are recovery days, and not an opportunity to see how fast you can go."

"Now, I don't like talking a lot. I'm a man of action," He grinned mischievously. "So, I want each of you to introduce yourself, give a highlight of your career, and freshmen, include your high school, so we know where you came from."

With that we went around the group, each athlete trying to come up with some clever comment which would make the team laugh. The introductions provided the chance for everyone to identify teammates, even though in theory, we knew them all. Coach pointed at the freshman who came late. A five-time California State Champion, with bests of 4:06 and 8:52, he was the stud touted to be the Big 10 Freshman of the Year. It certainly wasn't going to be me.

We went through the team - last year's conference runner-up in the 1500, a junior who was 6th in XC with a 14:01 PR in the 5K, another junior who had turned in a 1:49.75/3:46.52 double at Big Ten's, a senior who was 11th at the cross country championships with a best of 4:01, and a 29:52 sophomore who captured a top-twenty spot at last year's Big Ten Cross Country Meet.

With each story my confidence dropped a notch, making me wonder if I fit in with this group. I had three State Titles in Illinois, but none of my times matched their marks. And I was only ninth in XC last year. My nervousness overwhelmed me from the on-deck circle as Tyler Hutchinson gave his pitch.

Suddenly his spiel was over. He must have finished because everyone turned towards me.

"Jim Gatens, Grange Township HS." Trying to be cool I added "Go Lions!" Boos rained down.

"We're all Hawkeyes now. Don't forget it!"

My face turned crimson. I was going to add that my father had run here, but quickly forgot about it. I mentioned my 1600/3200 double at State and nodded at Craig, feeling like a misbehaving dog hit with a newspaper. There were three more guys after me, but I didn't hear a thing. I castigated myself for the stupidity. After we finished the team headed towards the door with Steve yelling over his shoulder.

"Dam run, here we come."

The freshmen fell to the rear of the pack, each wearing a brand new pair of Nike training flats as we jogged along the football stadium and past the hospital, down towards the Iowa River. Coach Wiz said nothing before we left, and I had no idea how far or where we were going.

This must have been tradition, because all the returning runners were talking back and forth, nonchalant about what lay ahead. By their silence, it was clear the other rookies were as clueless as me. We listened to the chatter ahead as someone mentioned his new apartment on Capital Street, another group debating the odds of a good football season. We had nothing to share, simply worried about our first challenge.

Up the hill on the far side of the river, turning on Clinton St. past the row of dorms and the President's home sitting high atop a bluff over the Iowa River, captains turned left on the wide sidewalk of Dubuque Street as we rolled down a long descent.

We continued north, climbing a long hill towards Interstate-80, crossing above the speeding traffic heading towards destinations unknown as we passed the meandering Iowa River a second time. Steve turned back towards the freshmen with a smirk on his face.

"Boys, I have a feeling we're not in high school anymore." He pointed ahead at a half-mile climb into terra incognita.

We charged up the hill en masse, picking up the pace ever so slightly as conversation ceased, eyes captured by laundry fluttering on the clothesline in the wind, fields of green cornstalks, red barns, and white houses, filling the rural setting.

I glanced at my watch as the seconds turned to minutes, wondering how much longer before we hit the top. Steve continued bursts of banter with Joe, but the rest of the team was quiet, placing all focus on the run.

Approaching a T-intersection, Steve and John pivoted to the right, leaning hard around the corner and into the next straight, a pair of Hawkeye tattoos clearly visible high on their right thighs. The sign ahead said it all. "Dam - 1 Mile."

I could vaguely remember dad and mom bringing me out here years ago to swim on visits to my grandparents in Iowa City. I must have been six or seven, remembering the buckets of sand I carried to bury my father on the beach.

The route started downhill and our tempo increased, passing what appeared to be a campsite and a series of parking lots to the left. Down below I spotted the rock-strewn spillway through cottonwoods at the bottom of the slope and realized what was ahead. I steeled myself for the climb and was ready when we leaned around the corner, the veterans charging hard up the steep incline to the dam.

I managed to hang with their pack, but it caught the other freshmen off guard, the three quickly falling behind. I drove my arms furiously the last few steps and got to the top with the pack, but it was tough to resume my stride.

Breathing was deep and harsh all around as we coasted near the top, waiting for the five who had fallen off to rejoin the group. As soon as we absorbed them, the leaders went back to the tempo while we gazed across at the huge boulders to the north that held back the brownish water. I spit over the braided wire railing, the river that exited far below trickling away in a narrow ribbon as it drifted into the distance.

From behind I could hear muttering.

“Do these fucking hills ever end?” It was from one of the sophomores.

“Not!” Steve smirked. “Dante’s tenth circle of hell!”

I looked across the spillway, rolling hills bisected by deep valleys, corn thick in fields alongside pastures filled with spotted brown cattle and solitary horses, the vista reminding me of scenery in a Grant Wood painting.

Another climb was just ahead, one that had to be four hundred meters to the top. I took a deep breath and used the momentum from the downhill, charging back up the other side with the lead pack. Eleven of us clung to the left shoulder of the blacktop road with a panorama of Iowa farms to the east and the river to the west.

As we headed back down the slope, we stared straight across at yet another big hill to climb, this one slightly longer than the last. We opened our strides as we neared the bottom, trying to use gravity as much as possible, feet slapping the ground like the sound of a soggy newspaper. With twenty meters remaining on the climb a slight gap opened, but I managed to slide back into the pack at the top, my breathing coming at a huge cost. There was little gas in my tank.

Tyler looked over his shoulder.

“Boys...the rest of the way back,” He took a big breath. “Is mostly downhill.” I sighed. We had survived the worst.

Thirty minutes later I could barely get to my feet after using the foam roll and stretching with the elastic bands alongside the team. After, Craig and I went downstairs and sat hunched over on the bench in the locker room, forearms resting on our thighs, thrilled we handled the first workout. It took an effort to get off the bench and take a shower, but it felt good to let the water wash away some of the fatigue. I passed my first test.

Three weeks later I looked across the starting line in my first collegiate meet at Northern Illinois, the pungent smell of sweat trickling from armpits, my stomach doing flip-flops like an accomplished gymnast. I’d busted my ass in pre-season, desperate to prove my worth to the team. But it came at a cost. I didn’t listen to Wiz’s advice.

The starter blew his whistle, each of us leaning forward in unison as eyes stared down the initial straight, my body skittish like a two-year-old filly. I sprinted alongside my teammates and merged into the cluster of runners, lost in the sea of color.

I remembered only snippets of the race, sweat dripping from eyebrows, the hollow sound of breathing from both ears as I sprinted towards the finish banner. The huge buildup for my first collegiate race fell far short of expectations. Berating myself while I shuffled through the chute, the disappointment welled in my gut as I joined teammates already standing by the water table, a fake smile pasted

on my face like a Halloween mask, afraid to look teammates in the eye. *That fuckin' sucked.*

Danny finished second overall, losing the race by only three seconds. Craig kicked my ass today, his 6K time over forty seconds faster than mine. I had been so thrilled coming in, anxious to prove my worth to the team, but finished disgusted with myself. It was so depressing.

On the drive home Coach Wiznewski told me to take two days off. My performance was so pathetic that he got no argument.

Two weeks into classes I fell into a daily routine. Up at 6:45, out the door with Craig, Michael, and Danny for a thirty minute run, a quick shower, with an even quicker breakfast at the dorms, and then off to my 9:00a.m class. Lunch at 11:30. Then two lectures and a nap if I was lucky.

After the workout we had a lifting routine with the strength coach on Monday and Thursday, followed by dinner and two hours of study hall in the basement of Rienow Hall. I was tired after three weeks but maintained the bright-eyed bushy-tailed excitement only a freshman possessed. It wouldn't last long.

It was clear from the start that Danny wasn't fitting in with the rest of the freshmen. He seemed to have only one speed. Fast. We had been told to take it easy on these morning runs. To stay with a seven-minute pace and recover for the afternoon workout, but he wanted to make it a race. It drove me crazy.

The first morning, we started easy but within five minutes he was at 6:30 and after ten minutes even faster. Expecting me not to respond to Danny's challenge was like asking me to walk past an ice cream shop without a purchase. I answered his challenges each time, as did Craig, but after an all-out sprint back to the dorms we were tired for the afternoon workouts.

I didn't have the courage to say anything to Danny, so the second week of classes I stopped by Coach's office in the afternoon.

“Coach, I don’t know how to say this but, Danny won’t back off on our morning runs. He starts out fine, but before you know it we’re running sub six minute pace. It’s killing me for the afternoon runs and I suspect its why I was so tired at NIU. I try to get him to slow down, but he won’t listen.”

“I could tell something was up.” Coach Wiz rubbed his face and sighed. “You guys looked flat the last few workouts.”

“Coach Kozak always preached only losers push it on morning runs and recovery days.” I grimaced at my thoughtless words. “I mean, Danny’s a nice guy. He works hard. But if he...”

Coach brushed me off.

“I hear you. I was afraid of that. I’ll talk with him before practice. His heart is in the right place, but he’s got to learn. His high school coach was one of those 100% everyday guys and that mantra turned Danny into a great runner. But at this level the same attitude isn’t going to work. There’s too much talent, the workload too high.” Coach stood up. “Thanks for stopping in.”

Each day after classes, I rode the campus bus to practice at 2:45 for the 3:15 start. Glatz’s advice about 8am classes, was right on. I would have been dead if I were getting to bed at 11pm and up early. Eight hours of sleep were a minimum. Nine almost a necessity.

My Rhetoric and Sociology classes were easy, but Chemistry 101 and Calculus were kicking my ass, forcing me to recalculate the needed investment in studies. The haggard look of a college freshman stared me in the face each morning as I brushed my teeth after another late night of studies with Craig.

I called or texted Marie almost every day the first three weeks, but after mom explained I was way over my monthly minutes, I was forced to cut back. The four hundred miles which separated Iowa City from Ann Arbor was heartbreaking, each call to my girlfriend ending on a sad note. It was wonderful to share our miseries and talk about the ups and downs, but the thing I really missed was her presence.

Tuesday after practice, Coach Wiz sat us down and went through the plan for the coming weeks.

"We're going to focus on two meets before Big Tens - Griak and Pre-Nationals. Pre-Nats is on the NCAA course. These are on two challenging courses, so it is imperative you continue to get your Sunday long runs on the reservoir route. The Griak course is tougher, probably, the toughest of the year. It's unusual for the winner to break 24:00 at Bolstad." The freshmen glanced at each other nervously.

"And when you look at the times for Pre-Nats it doesn't come across as all that tough, but I guarantee it is. You'll see sub 24:00's, but the best athletes in the nation are racing there. Any questions?" Wiz paused as Steve raised his hand.

"Coach, do you know if that freshman runner from Dowling is dating anyone?" He broke out in a huge grin as everyone laughed. "She's hot!"

"If she isn't, you'll be the first to know." Wiz continued as he grinned and shook his head.

The Tuesday before Minnesota, Coach Wiznewski posted a workout that made my asshole pucker.

Up to this point the training had been tougher than high school, but not so challenging I couldn't get my head around it. Today was different. Two sets of 5 x 1000 meters on the track at 2:55. And with only a 200 jog. Tyler said these converted to a four-minute-forty-second pace for a 1600 meters. *Whoa*. All day it was hard to concentrate on classes, thoughts drifting from my lectures to the six-plus miles of intervals we would be doing on a hot fall day.

A disquiet filled the locker room as I entered, voices muted, the typical banter absent from teammates. Many were here much earlier than usual, sitting on the benches with elbows on thighs, their hands folded together as though praying. Tyler was sitting on the floor doing math homework on the bench, clearly lost in equations.

Coach Wiz showed up at 3:15.

"OK fellas, two-mile warmup and we'll meet at the track."

I could remember as a young child, sitting in the waiting room of the dentist's office, trying not to think about the six-inch needle he was going to stick in my jaw. It was this discomfort that made

me wonder why I chose this sport. We quietly shuffled out the door, anxious to get the workout underway.

At the outdoor track Wiz broke us up into two groups of six, talking with our captains before the workout. I was in group two. We tossed our shirts in a pile on the infield, nervous sweat trickling from my armpits as we gathered behind the line.

John led my group through the first 1000 meter interval, our pack crowded like riders on the 5:20 commuter train. We finished the first one and transitioned into the 200 meter jog. Some of my anxiety disappeared. Tyler took number two, Joe number three, and Craig number four.

John tapped me on the shoulder for number five.

“Jim. You’re up.”

As we neared the line, I turned to make sure everyone was together, reminding myself not to go out too fast. The seventy second first lap was tough, taxing me more than I would have preferred, the telltale squint in my eyes proof. If I hadn’t been leading the group, I’m not certain I could have maintained the pace.

I repeated my mantra – *stay relaxed, don’t strain, make it look easy*, but it was contrary to any instinct. Wiz shouted “two-twenty-one” as we passed the 800. *Damn. Too slow.*

At least we had a longer break coming up. Two minutes of commercials on TV seems like an eternity. Torture through boredom. Each new advertisement drags, making seconds seem like minutes. Minutes like hours. In a workout, it is just the opposite. Two minutes is gone in the snap of your fingers. It certainly was today.

The heavy breathing subsided, but the fatigue was still there. I was walking on the edge of a cliff, failure only a misstep away. John turned to make sure the stragglers were together. Steve’s group has just taken off, Coach Wiz pivoting towards us with the second watch in his left hand.

“Time to separate the men from the boys.” He gave us a thumbs up.

Craig led the first one, five ducklings following right in his wake. My pulse jumped before we had even gone fifty meters, but I somehow hung on for the two and a half laps. My legs were heavy as we went into our jog, the slower pace somehow harder than the fast.

I couldn't fool myself any longer. I'd spent almost everything. Keeping the six-minute pace between intervals, even for the two hundred meters was as tough. John turned and yelled at the two who had fallen behind.

"Get your ass up here! If you can't be tough now, you'll never handle Big Ten competition. Let's go!"

I'd never seen him so intense. Joe took the second one. The lead pack of three passed the 800 at 2:20. I was at 2:22. I cringed hearing my split but was too tired to do anything about it. As we finished the 1000 John turned and shouted at the two behind me. I was relieved he wasn't yelling at me.

John muttered to himself.

"That pisses me off."

Our group was silent, too tired to say anything. I couldn't help worrying he might yell at me next. John had me take the third one. I was so afraid, I refused to give into my exhaustion despite the numbing fatigue. When I heard "2:21" from Coach Wiznewski I winced, but John didn't say a word after.

I kept my eyes down as we jogged into number four. Two left. I already knew I didn't have two more in me. My tank was empty.

I trailed near the back of the swarm as we jogged, unable to keep the faster tempo any longer, my breaths coming in rapid staccato bursts. The workout had broken me. I wasn't going to make the last two no matter how hard I tried. I looked up as we neared the line and noticed Danny and Michael standing there while group one had taken off for the ninth interval. Coach Wiz stepped towards us.

"Jim and Craig, you're done. Wait here."

The others began number nine. *Shit. I'm in trouble.* I tried so hard, but the 2:57 was as much as I could give. Now I was going to get chewed out. Four heads hung as Coach Wiznewski began.

"I want you guys to know I'm proud of how well you ran today. You're running with college veterans who didn't do any better than you did the first time they tried this workout." Danny looked up, challenging Coach Wiz with his gaze.

"I could have done the last two if you had let me."

"Danny, I have no doubt you could." Coach rubbed his face. "I have no doubt all of you could have. But I want you to remember, train don't strain."

We all looked him in the eye, although I could sense Danny was still pissed, unwilling to be so easily appeased. Coach continued.

"Each day save 5% of your energy. Never spend it all." He paused to give encouragement as group one passed 400 meters. "Every morning the baker sets aside a little bit of dough for the next day's bread. It saves him a lot of time to keep a reserve instead of using it all. His bread would still be as good if he hadn't, but it would take him more time to get started each day. I want all of you to remember the adage. If you do it will go a long way to your success."

Wiz yelled splits for group two and resumed.

"I'm not trying to punish you guys or hold you back. I'm just trying to make sure you are rested enough to race well." He shouted the 800 for John's group and smiled. "We train to race well. Training is the means to an end. It is not the end. Always remember that truth. Let's cheer on the guys for their last 1000."

I passed another test yet was aware of the many ahead.

The night before the workout I had tossed and turned, worried whether I had the courage. The right stuff. But for as much as the workout hurt and all the nervousness it put me through, I'd do it again a million times for what I gained. Respect by my teammates. Respect from the captains.

I stood under the shower after the workout, the stream of water rejuvenating my battery, preparing me for another day and another battle.

I literally ran into her going to the Friday Rhetoric class. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, I raced up the stairs of the English Philosophy Building to the third floor classroom, my footsteps echoing off the concrete walls as I took the stairs two at a time. Shooting through the open stairwell door, I ran right into a female, my face flushed in embarrassment as I almost knocked her off her feet.

I apologized profusely to the gorgeous brunette in the V-neck top who was laughing at my profound discomfort. When it was clear we were both going into the same classroom she insisted I go first, raising her hands in surrender as though I might run her down again. Taking my usual seat in back on the far side of the room, I listened intently when the instructor called roll.

Elizabeth Lindgren.

After class, she got on a full elevator, so I sprinted down the stairs and waited outside the front door, my heading rotating back and forth like a lighthouse beacon looking for the brunette. *Where did she go?* If I waited longer I would be late for Sociology. I thought about her the rest of the day.

The following Monday she walked up to me before class, standing at the seat beside me.

"You must be a fitness freak." She set her backpack on the desk. "I always see you coming out of the stairwell and you look like you don't have an ounce of fat on you."

"I do a lot of running." I had to tell myself not to say more. Otherwise, I would be just another dumb jock.

"Do you do any 5K's?"

"Yeah, actually I do."

And with the short conversation the instructor began. We walked down the stairs after class, pausing so I could write her cell number on a slip of paper. I couldn't stop myself from calling her that night. We talked for thirty-five minutes.



The Griak Meet was another disappointment. We finished 11th in the Gold Division. I still didn't feel that "click" before the race, the moment when confidence is high and you know things will fall into place during competition. Today was another struggle. Even for Danny. He had been doing the morning runs by himself, claiming he had to get to class on time. I had a feeling he was still running the sub six minute pace.

It was humbling to stand at the back of the chutes afterward, listening to my teammates stories, knowing I just got my ass kicked by a shitload of runners. One-hundred-seven to be exact. I was a three-time State Champion, ran a ton of miles over the summer, killed myself on all the workouts, and yet a pedestrian 25:58 was all I had to show on the Minnesota course.

I sat in the hallway outside the locker room and talked with dad on my flip phone, waiting for the others to finish showering. I nodded at a Marquette runner coming out the locker room door that I ran against in high school, unable to recall his name.

"You really didn't think Humble Pie would taste good, did you?" I could tell he was grinning. It made me mad.

"No, but I put in so much work. I hoped I would finish higher."

"Listen, I know how disappointed you are." His voice was softer. "I know how much you've invested. But it takes time. My freshman year I thought I could be in the top twenty at Big Tens. I got forty-seventh." I could hear the smirk in his voice. "You'll get there. Just keep doing all the right things. I promise it will happen, but you gotta give it time."

"But it still sucks." I sighed.

"You got that right!"

"Thanks for listening. The guys are heading towards the van. Love you."

I took Liz to the football game the open weekend after Griak, our first sort-of date. Liz, not Elizabeth, was an Engineering major from Davenport IA who had a mind for science. The opposite of me. It seemed strange a female would choose such a major, but I could tell she enjoyed smashing male egos. And it was that very confidence which made her even more attractive.

She was #1 in her high school class and a three-year starter on a State-ranked basketball team. Smart, good-looking, and athletic. The trifecta. I wasn't looking for a girlfriend, but I sure liked being with her. It was easy to convince myself I wasn't cheating on Maire, that I was just finding someone to pass the time with at school. *Right.*

Pre-Nationals, the site of this year's NCAA Championships were two weeks after the Griak meet. As I crawled out of the van at the Indiana State course late Friday afternoon the sun began to peek through dark clouds. I was excited about racing. My workouts had been good.

It was hard to be nonchalant watching teams from Oregon, Stanford, Oklahoma State, and Iona run by as we followed Coach Wiz in search of our team tent. A year ago, I read about this meet in *Track & Field News*. Now I was a part of it.

My performance at Griak, got me in the White Team race at Terre Haute, but like Griak, the level of talent was astounding, far beyond my comprehension. I was excited with my 25:29 on the NCAA course, although 107th and our number two freshman wasn't what I had in mind.

Craig bested me for the second time in a row, but the four second gap gave me hope. Our squad finished 10th out of the thirty-six teams, stories of individual performances bouncing back and forth as we did our cool down on the course. All I could think of was how pathetic I had run. My prep success was only a memory. I was jolted out of my reverie by Daniel Page, my high school nemesis from York HS.

"Hey man." He smiled. "What up?"

His sixth place finish was one-hundred-one spots better than mine. I waved and shouted.

“Someone opened up a can of whoop-ass on me.” He laughed and waved as the Stanford team jogged towards their tent.

Danny continued to race foolishly at Indiana State, unable to break 26:00 in the Open Race. Coach Wiznewski had hoped putting him in this section would give him a chance to shine, but the attempt was to no avail. He was quiet on the five hour drive home, never joining the thread of conversation despite attempts to bring him in.

I called Marie when we got back home, but lately I could feel we had lost some of the intimacy that had been so natural only weeks ago. It was easily attributed to the grind of school and hours we had to practice, and that my youthful exuberance was worn down by the grindstone of life. But the phone call left me disquieted, the conversation too jilted.

Unnerved, I called Liz for a second date ten minutes later, anxious to fill the growing void. I was walking on clouds when she said yes.



We left for Michigan State on Friday afternoon, nine of us spread out in the van, some studying for midterms, most wearing headphones engrossed in music on portable CD players. None of us were nervous yet, but it was too far out from the meet to ponder the competition.

After Saturday’s run-through on MSU’s Aker Golf Course, I made the call to Marie I’d put off for the past few hours. It was awkward the first few seconds, the conversation replete with fits and starts as I searched for the right words.

“Don’t expect me to be up front in this race. The competition is way too tough.”

“Oh, I bet you’re being modest. You’ll probably be in the top ten.” Marie seemed distant. Like she wished the conversation was over.

“I wish. I’ll be happy if I’m in the top thirty.” I could sense she had something more she wanted to say. “This field has some of the best in the nation. The men’s race starts at noon. Get a pencil and paper and I’ll give you directions.”

“Um. Hang on. That’s what I wanted to talk with you about. We have practice Sunday for a music recital on Tuesday. The group is getting together at 10am so I can’t make it..I’m sorry. I tried to get them to change it, but one guy works and it’s the only time we can all be there.”

“C’mon, can’t you come? I was so planning on showing you off to the guys.” I was crushed.

“Yeah. Sorry. I feel bad, but we’ll be together Thanksgiving.” She hesitated as though she was mouthing words to someone. “Well, I gotta go. Good luck.”

The dead air from my cell phone left me deflated like an old balloon. I stared at the floor, snapped the flip phone shut and tossed it on the bed as I walked out the door towards the lobby. It felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. The tone of her voice left a nagging feeling something was wrong, that things were worse than she was saying.

A year ago, at the State Meet on the Detweiller course I was as mentally prepared as an Olympian for the race, but even an A+ performance tomorrow might only get me 30th. There was just too much talent. I didn’t want to set unrealistic standards at my first Big Ten Meet, dad making it abundantly clear at one of our breakfast talks that dreams and reality didn’t always cross paths. My attitude may have seemed cavalier but this was a chance to watch and learn and to prepare for races down the road.

I was still groggy as we did our morning shake-out run in the rain, Marie’s call filling my heart with an uneasiness. Talk was non-existent as we ran up and down sidewalks around the hotel and shuffled through the neighborhood in our new rain gear as quietly as a bunch of hooded monks. Stretching under the hotel portico when we returned, conversation erupted in fits and spurts as our slumber wore off, everyone glancing up and nodding as the Illini team jogged into the rain.

We warmed up on the last two miles of the Aker course, water seeping into shoes from the saturated grass, rain falling in a steady patter on our hoods as we trudged down the white line. I glanced over at Danny, wondering what was going through his head. Ten weeks ago, I thought he would be unbeatable. Time proved me wrong.

One last stride out and the captains pulled us together in a huddle halfway down the first fairway.

“OK guys, this is it. This is what we busted our asses for. Don’t hold anything back. Be in position and we can be successful. Hawks on three. One-two-three-HAWKS!”

From the gun, Nationally-ranked Wisconsin went to the front, led by super-stud Matt Tegenkamp. The Ohio State and Michigan runners challenged the Badgers, but it was clear everyone was letting the Wisconsin squad dictate the pace, teams clustered behind in clumps of soggy colors. Rain began coming down heavier, hair plastered to heads as puddles began appearing in depressions on the course.

I watched the race unfold from the best seat in the house, turf flying off spikes like grit from tires of a semi-truck, spots of sludge plastering my face and singlet as we ran across fairways. Winds picked up intermittently creating small eddies of dead leaves on the backside of rain shelters, the scene reminiscent of a Kansas storm rolling across the plains.

We zigzagged around the course in colorful bunches – the red and white of Wisconsin forming a human blade up front, the back of every uniform speckled with mud as though each passing runner had been flicked by a paintbrush.

By the 6K Craig and I were tossed from the pack like a tornado that ripped shingles from a roof. I had never been so far back in a race. I fought the last mile trying to make up for my weakness, valiantly hoping I could catch someone on the final straight. I did, but there was little joy in passing a runner whose tank was empty.

Craig was 46th and I was 47th, the Hawkeye singlet plastered to my chest like a wet t-shirt contestant. I shook water from my hair, amused by my place. It was the same position dad finished

thirty-three years ago at the Big Ten meet. And on this very same course. It must have been a message from the running gods. Our team huddled near the gear, Danny standing by himself with his head hanging, each of us oblivious to the steady rainfall as we shared stories of the race.

“Man, that was embarrassing.” I shook my head at Craig. He shrugged his shoulders.

“And I thought I was ready for the Big Ten.”

Coach Wiz approached our group with a smile.

“John and Steve, 10th and 12th overall. Impressive races. A 24:33 for John and 24:38 for Steve. Awesome. Especially in these conditions. You guys can be all-Americans if you continue to race like you did today! I’m enormously proud of you two.” He turned and faced the others.

“Alex, Tyler, and Joe. You three were studs. You never let the race get away from you. John and Steve were crucial, but without the toughness of you three, we wouldn’t have done so well. Congratulations. A Championship effort!” He turned to the three freshmen.

“Gentlemen, welcome to the Big Ten.” Coach Wiz smiled. “A conference where balls are so big they drag on the ground.” He laughed and continued. “No, seriously. You guys did an excellent job. It’s tough when you’re running against many of the best teams in the nation, but you handled it well. The only way you learn how to deal with great competition, is to stick your nose in it and give it your best shot.”

Danny stood mutely to the side. “Danny, stay here for a second.”

“How’d we do?” Alex asked.

“Only seventh. Twelve points out of 4th. Not our day.” Coach brightened. “Okay, get your gear on and do a cool down.” Joe turned to Coach Wiznewski as we started to jog away.

“Coach, where are we going for lunch? I’m starving. I shit my brains out after our warm-up.” Everybody laughed.

We took off, each one thinking about the race and wondering what Coach Wiznewski was saying to Danny.

Afterward we drove over to the massive Jenison Field house for a warm shower, stopping at Beggar's Banquet for a late lunch, everyone fast asleep before we had driven twenty miles. I wasn't surprised with my conference finish, but Marie's absence at the meet knocked me for a loop. I had talked about the race for weeks. Our relationship was the last thing I thought of before I nodded off.

When Coach Wiz came into the locker room on Monday, he had a troubled look on his face.

"I talked with Danny after we got back from the meet and then just now." He looked at the ground. "He's really down and wants to take some time for himself. I told him to take two weeks off and we would talk again."

"Don't forget he's on the team." John nodded. "Let him know we care. Every runner has a point in his career when things fall apart, so go easy on him. He's still our teammate."

"OK guys, all I have scheduled for today is an easy ten miles." Coach scanned every face. "We'll talk about Regionals when you get back from the run."

The rest ran the ten mile East High loop while we talked about everything and nothing, happy the overcast skies weren't spouting rain.

Marie and I didn't talk on the phone that weekend, both of us pretending we didn't have the time for more. I always thought we had a rock solid relationship, but I was discovering the adage, out of sight out of mind applied to any long distance relationship. Serious discussion would have to wait until Thanksgiving.



Friday, November 15th we headed east towards Illinois State for the NCAA Midwest Regional on Weibring Golf Course. The past ten days our workouts had been exceptional, the veteran runners believing we had a realistic shot at the NCAA Meet if we stepped up on Saturday. I was a bit skeptical after our 7th at the conference meet – but what did I know. Minnesota and Illinois were the only

Big Ten schools in our region, but we certainly expected challenges from Big 12 members, Oklahoma State and Kansas. Even though the odds were against us, stranger things had happened. There was always a dark horse.

Coach Wiz stood at the top of the hill two hundred meters away from the starting line, huddling up with us as we stuck a hand into the circle.

“OK boys, this is what we’ve been working for; the chance to get to Nationals.” He looked around at the faces. “Run aggressively and we can go to the Big Dance. Hawks on three. One-two-three-HAWKS!”

We jogged back to the line and stripped off sweats, the frigid NE winds making me question why I didn’t wear a shirt under my singlet. At least I had a sock in my shorts and some light-weight gloves.

Lined up in two rows, our seven shot from the box at the blast of the gun, winds testing our willpower as we surged up to the front of the swarm. It was exciting to have everyone in the top twenty-five at the mile, challenging teams for a trip to Nationals, but in the back of my mind all I could think of was the six-point-two miles today instead of five. I was the first to slip from our pack – another three plus miles at this pace suddenly overwhelming.

My last two miles were with the intensity of a six-year-old, wondering as I struggled if I even made it into the top seventy-five as I crossed the line. John ran up to me with a huge grin on his face as I exited the chutes.

“We won. We fucking won!” He embraced me in a bear hug. “Wiz said we won!”

I stared at John in disbelief, wanting to believe him, but afraid to do so. Wiz approached with a huge grin on his face.

“Nice job Jim. Awesome!” It was hard to take his words seriously after my so-so performance. Coach pounded me on the back and shook my hand. “We’re going to Nationals.” He turned to the rest of the team. “Guys, guys, circle up.”

We put our arms over each other’s shoulders, grins on every face.

"I'm proud of you guys. After Big Ten I know you questioned whether we were good enough. But you can see that we are. If you remember nothing else, always remember that each race is another opportunity, another chance to prove yourself. We control our destiny if we stay focused." He looked at faces one by one and then smiled.

"How about one last cheer?" We rocked side to side in the circle, John leading the modulated chant.

"Gooooooooooooo..." Everyone shouted together, "HAWKS!"

Standing on the Award Platform while Wiz held the Midwest Regional plaque, I looked out on the crowd at faces just like mine, reminded of our surprise runner-up finish at the Richard Spring Invitational in Peoria just two years ago. My contribution seemed so meager today but I knew things would improve.

I still couldn't believe we won.

Seven days later we drove five hours east to Terre Haute for the NCAA Meet at Indiana State, the same course we'd run on five weeks earlier. It was sunny, but temperatures were cold enough on race day that it was nice to have a space heater in our tent, the gloves Wiz passed out a nice addition.

We lined up in box 17, in between Texas and Tennessee, glad orange wasn't our school color. I nodded at Mark Floreani as the official checked our uniforms, trading good lucks as we recalled those Sunday winter runs on the Chicago lakefront path back in high school.

Afterward, it was cool to see that three of the top ten finishers in this race were ones who ran at Detweiller a few years ago, two-time Illinois prep cross country Champion Jorge Torres taking the individual title today for Colorado with an impressive 29:04.7. But it was Stanford who took the top trophy with 47 points.

The Hawkeyes had spent it all to get here, finishing 29th today, John's 75th the best of our team. I struggled again, finishing 225th, crossing the line as our seventh man. Wiz pulled us together at the back of the chutes.

“I don’t believe in moral victories. Not everyone deserves a medal. But I applaud all you put into the season, the toughness you showed to get our team here.” He paused. “The Big Ten Meet was a test of your courage, your willingness to continue in the face of adversity, and all of you answered the bell. You didn’t let the disappointment defeat the team. I’m proud of what we achieved today. Hold your head high. Remind people we’re one of the top thirty teams in the nation. Not many can say that.”



My first collegiate season was a humbling experience. The talent far superior to anything I guessed. In high school I was only exposed to a small portion of the pool, somehow ignorant of the forty-nine other states, seven or eight of which had more talent than Illinois.

I was too naïve to consider there are well over two thousand collegiate cross country runners, a thousand who have more miles in the bank, half of this group owning times far superior to mine. Even the smallest collegiate meet was as challenging as our state meet, every workout harder than anything I’d tried in high school. Like a five year old claiming he wants to be an astronaut, I was still clueless about the work it would take to match the brilliance of today’s talent.

Two more days and I would be back with my family and the chance to talk with Marie over Thanksgiving. It was clear my long relationship with her was floundering, the burgeoning one with Liz a tantalizing option. Yet it wasn’t easy to leave the comforts of one for the uncertainty of the other. In free moments I pondered two ships passing in the night. I was in the only boat I’d ever known, desperately bailing water as it began to sink, afraid to jump into the other vessel. The act would require a leap of faith.

Each day I struggled with the answer, but if I was to be honest I already knew my choice.