

A Golden Era

A Tale of Two Runners



A NOVEL BY JIM KNOEDEL

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

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A GOLDEN ERA – A TALE OF TWO RUNNERS

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Written by Jim Knoedel

This book is dedicated to my father and mother who provided love and support through my life, much more than I appreciated until I was aged like them; and to my older brother and sister who died before their time. I miss them all.

I am forever indebted to the coaches who helped me become the meager runner I was and to the many coaches I had the good fortune to cross paths with over my fifty years in the Greatest Sport.

And to Mike Kuharic from Lyons Township HS who provided inspiration for the high school coach in this book.

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Prologue

May 29, 1976

Five laps remained. I stared at the shadows the stadium lights made on the track, hypnotized by the black and white kaleidoscope blending from one pattern into another. Circling the track, I made a silent plea to the running gods, asking them to resurrect my chances one last time, to snatch one last victory from the hand of defeat. But there was no response, no glimmer that my dream would be realized.

Snippets of years past flashed through my mind like a film reel as one foot followed the other—holding the 1969 State Cross Country Championship trophy overhead, the grin on Cretz’s face when I qualified for my first NCAA Championship, and holding my first All-American certificate in the 1974 Steeplechase. Each of these occasions validated my years of work, joyous moments I would never forget, ones which had made my decision to become a runner so profound.

But today it was over, the ending of this six-mile no longer a race. It was simply a challenge to finish what I had started so many years ago. To show myself and others that I refused to quit, not even in the face of my biggest failure.

I berated myself for the hubris of the last eighteen months, the crazy dream which had consumed the past nine years of my life: running at the 1976 Olympic Trials. Now it was gone. I had no more chances. No more races. Like a desperate gambler, I tossed in my last chip and lost. It was hard to believe there was no next year or

another race. My career was over, discarded like an empty bottle in the ditch.

I never had illusions of making the Olympic team. I wasn't that good, not even on my best day. I didn't have what it took to be in the top three at Eugene. I didn't possess that kind of talent.

My dream was straightforward: simply to qualify for the trials and maybe sneak in for a top ten finish. To pull the rabbit out of my hat one last time. A final accomplishment which would put a nice last sentence on the end of a successful running career and to reach the goal I set back in 1968.

At three miles, Johnson, Mandera, and Chapa continued to push the pace when they heard 14:08, but for some reason I didn't respond. Coach Cretzmeyer yelled at me to join them, but my fire was gone. The tank was empty.

By four miles, I tossed in the cards, disgusted with my hand. There would be no happy ending. I was as certain of the fact as the assurance of pain the moment before a car crash. I wouldn't break 28:30 and I knew I wasn't going to the 10K Trials in Oregon. The truth was as gut-wrenching as the death of my brother in Vietnam.

As I circled the track on the last lap, I stared into the darkness beyond the stadium lights, overwhelmed with despair. Tomorrow I was going back to Iowa City to end one career and start another. What it would entail, I didn't have a clue.

I had a degree but no job prospects. I had gambled everything on this throw of the dice and came up snake-eyes. My lease ran out in three days, expecting to spend the rest of June in Eugene. I was twenty-four-years old and nothing to show for all my work.

I crossed the line and jogged off the edge of the track, ripped off my Tokyo '64s and threw them in the garbage barrel as I walked barefoot through the gate. For the first time in my life I didn't bother with a cooldown. It really wouldn't matter.

I slipped on my flats and crossed the street, sitting on a bench in the gloom of Washington Park, staring into the night. My mind went back to Chick's wisecrack after the State XC Meet my sophomore year.

Chapter 1

November 6, 1999

I had been told many times as a young child that my father had been a runner of some acclaim well before the running boom had amped up in the mid-70s. He continued to get recognition from time to time, humbly acknowledging trite stories and kind praise, his demeanor transformed with each encounter as though transported back in time.

Yet his successes meant little to me, even less after my parent's divorce. They were his stories, not mine. I was content to go my own way. Do my own thing.

Although I never ran track, I did inherit his love of sports and an instinctual craving for competition. Like him, I was always the fastest on my block and the fastest in gym class. And like him, I detested losing.

I didn't whine, I didn't make excuses, I didn't complain about officials or lame teammates; I just worked harder and challenged my opponent's toughness, proved to them they didn't have what I did. Adults told me many times I reminded them of my father, Jim Sr., both of us cut from the same cloth, but I just shrugged.

It was probably the reason I pursued soccer. Since I was five, I had played with a single-mindedness that amazed even my father, though he had little interest in the sport. Each game day I couldn't wait to play, driving my parents crazy, as impatient as a three-year-old opening presents.

Other parents wondered if my father drove me too hard, a typical helicopter parent, but he rarely said a word or expressed a thought as he watched me play. All my motivation came from within. It was something I was born with.

After my freshman year at Grange Township High School, I practiced with the soccer club team all summer, Mom driving me to tournaments every weekend with my little sister tagging along. I was focused on becoming a great soccer player, one who hoped to play in college, despite a nagging belief I didn't have the innate skills the great ones possessed.

Some of my teammates had far greater talent, had expertise it took me months to acquire. Bending the ball around the goalie or utilizing a bicycle kick to score, skills that would have eluded me without thousands of repetitions. I outplayed opponents by being in better shape, utilizing my limited skills for the full sixty minutes. I ran them ragged, relying on my superior conditioning when they were overwhelmed with fatigue.

That fall we had a great season, winning the Near West Suburban Soccer title, putting us in the first round of the State Tournament against area rival Stagg HS. We had beaten the Chargers 2-0 at their place early in the season off two great shots by Billy Brady and were psyched about going up against them at home, convinced we would kick their asses.

After that, it was joining the Elite Eight. Everyone on the team talked like it was etched in stone. I was pumped up about our chances.



I'll never forget walking off the field after the 0-1 loss, feeling a combination of disbelief and anger. The upset was stunning. I couldn't grasp the reality. With a Stagg goal late in the game, all our dreams were squashed. All my work was wasted. The fantasy was gone. I had invested so much in a season which was over far too soon. I didn't

even bother to shower at school. I rode home with Mom as the team shuffled to the school bus, neither of us saying a word.

Rarely is any decision based on a single incident, but this game changed my life. I was crushed by our loss and the unexpected outcome. We all understood success in soccer was about the team and a sacrifice for the common good.

Yet when Stagg double-teamed Brady, our leading scorer, he continued to demand the ball, failing to give an assist to wide open teammates who could have scored easily. Coach Jones made it clear at half-time what needed to be done, but Brady stubbornly refused to listen to common sense.

And like that, our season was over.

Acknowledging that a teammate didn't want to sacrifice his ego for a win was something I couldn't comprehend. In my world, winning was all that mattered. That he was one of the leading scorers in the state meant little to me. If you weren't going to be the one who scored, you did everything in your power to make sure a teammate did. Anything to help the team win. That's what Dad taught me as a youngster and that's what I continued to believe as I grew.

The loss forced me to reevaluate my teammates. Our upperclassmen were far too self-absorbed, prioritizing parties over practices, self-centeredness over self-sacrifice. It was disgusting to watch. As the only sophomore on the varsity team, I didn't feel it was my position to challenge them, but it certainly made me question their dedication. I was disgusted with our loss in the first round, the seniors laughingly describing it as a chance to start the partying sooner.

My running continued after the season was over, some of it simply to assuage my anger, included into my daily routine with next year in mind. But if truth be told, my teammates had broken my heart. I trusted them, and they let me down. I continued my running, telling the team I wanted to improve my conditioning for soccer, but that wasn't the truth. I was afraid to let them know the real reason. I was almost afraid to admit it to myself.

I didn't tell the track coach or even Mom of my decision: I would be going out for track the coming spring. There would be no club soccer like all the years before. Last season had pissed me off like no other. The finish convinced me another year of soccer would only be another year of frustration.

I laid my cards on the table and examined them closely. Never again would I allow teammates with bad attitudes determine my success. It was going to be my decision, my hard work that determined my outcome.

Chapter 2

September 5, 1967

The first time I ran the 600-yard for President Kennedy's National Fitness Test in seventh grade gym class, I beat everyone. A few took off like they were going to set the world record, but I caught them before we had completed a lap. It felt good to open my stride and pull around them with little resistance and push myself to the finish.

When I crossed the line, I turned to look for the others, surprised to see how far they trailed behind. It was astounding. The first thing I had ever done well. I never thought of myself as good athlete, the best description as determined or tenacious, but mostly a teen with not much talent. I didn't know if my 600 time was good, bad, or whether the best athletes in my class had ran any faster, but I did have an inkling running was something I should continue to pursue.

All my life our family had been active. When Mom said run to the grocery store, she literally meant run to the grocery store. Swim lessons at the city pool entailed riding bikes three miles to get there and three miles back. Playing baseball included walking or biking two miles over to Creekside Park so we could play on a real field. We didn't know what the word aerobic work meant, but you would have seen us practice it every day.

Being the fastest was not a thing that I had thought much about. I didn't have to invest a lot to be good. It was just a matter of getting out in front of the others and pushing to go even faster.

Though my older brother never cared much about competition, Dad never let me off easy in sports, more than happy to beat me if

I wasn't good enough to win. The fact that we were eight, ten, or twelve didn't matter one bit.

If I won, it was because I deserved it, not because he had let me beat him. I still remember racing him on bikes to City Park when I was eleven, pulling away the last quarter mile, unable to suppress the smile as he rolled up to the flagpole 100 yards behind me.

I had a paper route since I was in fifth grade. I got up at 5:45 every morning to deliver sixty-two papers through snow, rain, and heat, teaching me the importance of diligence from a young age. There was never a question of whether the weather would be so bad that I wouldn't have to deliver. The stack of newspapers always showed up on the driveway. I always had to get out the door. When I became a runner, it was easy to decide if harsh weather meant I should take the day off. Nope. There was never a day bad enough.

"99 percent of success is hard work." Dad smiled. "No one can do it for you, so make up your mind to put in the time and effort to succeed. Never quit!"

I still tried all the popular sports in Junior High: football in seventh grade (too skinny), basketball in eighth grade (too uncoordinated) and baseball in ninth grade (couldn't hit), so I decided to try a new sport my sophomore year when I began classes at East High.

I showed up at the initial cross country meeting after school and saw my first period gym teacher was the coach. On my list of classes, it said Mr. Forwald, but in his first sentence to us he said we were to call him "Chick." All the sophomores snickered.

I scanned the cluster of outcasts in the gym, most obviously too small or too skinny to be on the football team, listening to the boisterous conversations from the juniors and seniors in the front row as I quietly found a spot up high in the bleachers. On the far side I saw Kevin McBryant, his newly shorn crewcut showing off the scar on the back of his skull where he walked into a baseball bat.

I plopped down beside Kevin and nudged him, surveying the faces in front. Clad in a white short-sleeved polo and white pants,

Chick ambled out from the locker room and scanned the rag-tag group, looking over the faces of newcomers in the bleachers.

He cleared his throat. "I know some of you are here because you want to be in shape for basketball tryouts on October 15, but I also know some of you are here because you're serious about running." He paused and tossed a stack of papers on the chair in front of the team. "We will meet at 3:15 p.m. tomorrow and begin with a mile time trial to see what kind of shape you are in. Show up dressed and ready to go. Grab a medical form to take home to your parents. We're done. Have it back by the end of the week."

That was it? I had expected some Knute Rockne speech. Rah, rah, do it for the team.

I walked out the front door of the gym alongside Kevin, talking about classes, wondering if I had made a mistake joining the team. The coach didn't impress me. It didn't even seem like he was very enthused about the sport. All I saw was an old man corralled into being our coach, investing as little as possible for bigger paycheck.

Oh well, maybe cross country would lead to better things. An East High letter jacket? A girlfriend? I needed something. I was tired of being a dork.

The next day, the sophomores stood outside the gym doors, clustered like a bunch of turkeys before the slaughter. I was no exception. I wore billowing red gym shorts that made my legs look like pale pencils, a white T-shirt that did the same for my chest, and a black pair of low-cut Converse All-Stars.

I stood beside Kevin McBryant, listening to Chick explain today's workout. I already knew Kevin wasn't going to be any good. He was our neighborhood klutz, the one who always got picked last on every team. The one who never fit in. At our Saturday morning Catechism classes, he recited the "Hail Mary" when everyone else was saying the "Our Father." I stood next to him out of pity, and maybe because I was afraid no one would stand next to me.

“All you sophomores over here.” Chick pulled a black magic marker from his back pocket. “I want all of you to line up, and I’ll write your name on the back of your shirt, so I know who you are.”

We stood in a short line, approaching Chick in single steps like a bride walking up the aisle, turning our backs to him and wrapping arms around narrow bodies in a hug so he had a flat surface to write the name. Like the solvent in mimeograph copies, everyone inhaled the fumes as we shuffled back, like they were trying to get high off the scent.

“OK you knuckleheads, I want you to do a two-lap warmup around the grounds and we’ll get going. Captains,” he pointed at two seniors, “show them the course.”

The sophomores just stood there as the upper class athletes shuffled towards the tennis courts and broke into a trot. Kevin and I trailed behind, lost in the swarm.

Probably eight or nine of us were rookies. A pathetic turnout. The small number meant this was either a very unpopular sport or much tougher than I imagined. Neither answer was appealing.

Down the hill along the south side of the football field, the swarm began to separate as we ran up the hill along First Avenue.

Kevin was having a tough time staying up with me even though we had barely gone half a mile. For some reason I always had patience with him, my fragile ego finding solace in someone stepped on just as often. He could be so aggravating at times, but I overlooked his shortcomings, knowing how tenuous the ties of being a part of the “cool group” could be. Everyone made fun of his lack of coordination, and especially the goofy smile, but he always showed up and gave it his best, even if it wasn’t much.

The captains led the team as we circled the field, making a U-turn at the south entrance, north along the practice fields, then towards the baseball diamond, around the outfield fence and back to the gymnasium. One mile.

It must have taken ten minutes. I felt like I was dragging Kevin through the first loop, positive we had to be the last ones, but as

we ran around the outfield fence there must have been five to six sophomores and even a few juniors behind us. And not just a little bit behind. A quarter mile would be accurate.

As we started the second loop, Kevin began walking and motioned for me to continue the last circuit on my own. With little effort, I accelerated and passed a bunch of stragglers, catching up with the captains before they completed the second loop. We stretched while the remainder of runners, most of them staggering in as though they were survivors of Donner's Pass arrived at the tennis courts. It was clear half of the rookies wouldn't even make it to the time trial. Kevin would probably be one.

Chick stood in front of us, a stopwatch hanging on a shoestring around his neck, his receding white hair even more stark against a sunburned face. Some of the guys took off their shirts because it was so hot, but I was too embarrassed to take off mine. My chest was as flat as a ten-year-old girl. Some changed into spikes. I didn't have any.

"OK. All you knuckleheads come over here. We're going to line up even with the edge of the tennis courts. Sophomores in back. Juniors and seniors," he pointed, "take your shirts off. Sophomores keep your shirts on so I can identify you. We'll see how fast all of you can run the mile loop."

That was it. No "good luck" or "pace yourself." The rest of the upper class athletes tossed their shirts over by the fence and lined up. Six white shirts stood beside me as we waited for one junior to tie his shoes.

A whistle and we were off. I was almost knocked down at the start. The group took off like Chick had said there was free food. We flew down the first small hill and through the spectator gate of the football field at a breakneck pace. I noticed there were only two behind me as we turned and raced up the First Avenue hill.

We had whittled down to eighteen or nineteen candidates after the two-mile warmup, most of the holdouts with a variety of ailments that sounded very suspicious. I chased after the lead pack like I was

running down the last bus of the day, astounded by how quickly they had started.

At the top of the gentle slope along First Avenue, a few shirtless runners but mostly those in shirts slowed dramatically, their foolish initial efforts coming at too high a price. I caught another group of four on the north side of the football field by the flagpole and three more in single file as I passed behind the press box, the sound of their spikes scraping on the cement as obnoxious as fingernails on a chalkboard.

A quartet of shirtless runners glanced over at me through the six-foot chain link fence as the leaders made the U-turn out of the stadium and stormed in the opposite direction. I made the same turn ten to twelve seconds later, looking down the long straight for white t-shirts ahead. There were none. Only skins.

I charged down the chalk sideline of the practice football fields after the second group of three, closing the forty-yard gap with every step. As we made a left turn around the small backstop, I reduced their lead to ten yards, and then five before I went up the small hill towards the baseball diamond. Joining the second pack as we passed the dugout, one of the juniors gave me a quick glance as I pulled alongside.

The effort to catch them just about killed me, but I did, easing back on the throttle just a bit, hoping to regather some of my courage before I ran them down the last straight.

It would prove to be a mistake. My estimate of a superior speed was vastly overrated. We passed the right field foul pole and the sprint was on. I pumped my arms hard, feeling a bit like a novice race walker, yet certain my stupendous effort would catch the group off-guard. My kick turned out to be no better than theirs. In fact, a junior pulled beside me in the last twenty-five yards and I crossed the imaginary line at Chick's body three steps behind him.

Damn. That hurt. With my hands on my knees, I glanced sideways as the rest of the team came in. No one said a word, although I

noticed two seniors pointing at me as I stood waiting for Kevin. He was nowhere to be seen as I scanned the course.

I walked over to get a drink from the fountain and rejoined the team, bodies littered on the ground like ripe apples off a tree. Kevin finished and dropped to the ground like he'd passed out.

I walked over and pulled him to his feet as Chick shouted, "OK guys, over here." Chick waited for the rest to struggle to their feet. "I got times for each of you. I'll read them in order. Dave Eastman, Jack Wilson, Jim Fomby 4:38, Roger Marquez 4:43, Steve Wilkinson 4:52, Matt O'Hara 4:58, Tim Kennedy 5:03, Jim Gatens 5:04..."

I didn't hear anything after he said Gatens. I didn't even hear him mention I was the first sophomore to finish. All I heard was Chick say 5:04, the benchmark I would use the rest of my high school career.

Kevin and I walked home after a half-mile cooldown and a long shower, both of us excited about the first meet a week from Thursday. From a tree up ahead I could hear the distinctive paired notes of a male oriole as we shuffled down the school sidewalk, Kevin excitedly talking about Father Tiernan asking him to be an altar boy at St. Mary's, an obligation that was lower on my list than getting wisdom teeth pulled.

Ever since his father died two years ago, Kevin was at a loss for a male figure in his life. He gushed about the games, movie nights, and the overnight retreats as we walked up his driveway.

After the time trial, Chick mentioned we should be including three-mile runs Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings before school to get in extra work.

The next morning at 6:45 a.m. I walked through the backyard and slipped through the missing slat in the fence behind Kevin's house. I knocked on their back door, and the two of us trudged up the hill towards school with the scent of burning trash hanging in the air.

In the distance, I could hear strains of the Little Hawk marching band playing, the volume floating in and out like a distant AM radio station, barely able to distinguish the tune. Eventually I could make out, "Can't Buy Me Love" as we ran across the parking lot and up the

hill. We did three loops of the time trial course, more tired of hearing the Beatles tune for the sixth time than we were of the running and headed back home for breakfast and a shower.

"How fast did you run?" Dad had the transistor radio tuned to KXIC for the morning news.

"You got me. I ran with Kevin McBryant, so probably not very quick."

Dad's "Oh" indicated he realized what a slowpoke Kevin was.

"I guess we went about thirty minutes. I didn't check the clock before I left. Where's the cereal?"

Mom pulled the boxes of Quisp, Fruit Loops, Wheaties, Frosted Flakes, Sugar Smacks and Raisin Bran (yuk) from the cupboard like she was holding an accordion as Don headed out the door for classes at the university.

"See you," Mom called after him. "Have a good day."

The rest of us just mumbled. Bill sat on the far side of the table with his chin balanced on a fistful hand, scooping a spoonful of Frosted Flakes into his mouth, eyes closed as though he was still asleep. Susie traced a line through the maze on the back of the cereal box with a pencil while Mom poured the second can of water in with the concentrated orange juice.

She looked up as she stirred. "So. When is your first meet?"

Swallowing a mouthful, I replied. "Chick said we run in a dual against Cedar Rapids Jefferson on Thursday at home."

"Let me know how many people you beat."

She played basketball in high school (they wore knee-length skirts back then) and still impressed me with how easily she could sink a free throw, but it was clear she didn't know much about running. In her opinion, if there wasn't a ball or a scoreboard, it wasn't a sport. She never understood whether it was a sub-5:00 pace or a sub-6:00 minute pace I was shooting for, although maybe she was pulling my leg.

Regardless, Mom was competitive, whether at Bridge Club, ping pong, or racing in the paddleboats on the lake. Like Dad, she had always made a point to challenge us and refused to let anyone win

unless we had earned it. I cried many times when I lost, but her response was always the same – work harder.



The sophomores were in the first race Thursday afternoon. I was excited to get the season started, but nervous about my chances, afraid I would get my butt kicked. The sun cast narrow shadows off our bodies as seven of us toed the chalk line in the grass. Fall was just around the corner even though today was warm, temperatures hovering around eighty degrees.

Glancing down the line with our backs near the fence, you would be hard pressed to find a bigger group of misfits. Most of the East High sophomores were rail thin, wearing uniforms that appeared to be twenty-years-old, faded and a size too big. A spectator would have guessed our school colors were washed-out red and dirty white, as though the uniforms were picked up at some garage sale. One of the smaller sophomores had to tie a shoestring on the back straps of the singlet to keep the jersey from falling off his narrow shoulders.

Standing at the line, I looked like a stork in a pair of boxing trunks. Almost six-feet tall and 128 pounds, Dad used to joke he couldn't see me if I stood sideways. My legs were as wide at the calf as at the thigh with a matching pair of arms thrown in. I was self-conscious about my body, performing hundreds of push-ups daily in hopes of filling out my chest, but nothing seemed to help.

I glanced across at the pale blue uniforms on the Jefferson J-Hawks, guessing they were brand new. Though we were all the same age, their team seemed to possess a confidence that had eluded me so far in life. It was confidence that my cousin from California exuded when he visited with his store-bought skateboard, and an aura of cool that followed him everywhere.

The CR Jefferson team had legs with more power, chests far bigger than their waists, sideburns to the bottom of the earlobe, and faces clear of zits. I was intimidated before we even began.

As we waited for Chick to fire the starting pistol, East High cheerleaders shook their pom-poms and shouted encouragement, “Go Little Hawks” and “Crush the J-Hawks.”

I stared at the trio, too nervous to be horny. They caught my attention, but I knew I didn’t catch theirs. They weren’t cheering for me. In my head maybe, but the truth was I was just another dork standing at the starting line. I had as much chance of dating one of them as I did being named Valedictorian.

Chick raised the pistol. “Runners set!”

I leaned forward and the gun went off, seven Little Hawks and ten J-Hawks shooting across the practice field on the 1½-mile race. We blended into one group as though magnetically attracted, morphing from a horizontal line into a misshapen oval, a mixture of light blue with red and white in a mishmash of color.

Our team meekly followed the J-Hawks, uncertain what to expect as we raced down the first straight. The lead group made a left turn and climbed the only hill on the course, the pack transforming into a long, thin line, pulled apart like a string of taffy. I stuck on the back of the top six Jefferson runners with ease, curious to see what they did.

I couldn’t understand why the pace seemed so slow, certain I’d ran faster in practice. When their group began to split, I stuck with the first three J-Hawks who passed the mile at 5:19.

Why was no one pushing the tempo? Glancing over towards the Cedar Rapids team, I made my decision. Time to go. At the far goal post on the practice field, I leaned into the turn and picked up the pace, easily pulling away.

Not one of the Jefferson runners had any response. I was shocked. At every turn I continued to check behind, refusing to believe it was that simple. I crossed the finish line fifty yards in front of the next runner with a 7:45 for the mile and a half.

Before the race I thought I’d be lucky to be in the top five. I just won.

I was so excited that I had goosebumps on my arms as I turned towards the finish line to cheer on my teammates, watching as they raced into the chute one-by-one like they were entering a revolving door. Our varsity squad jogged by as the last Jefferson finisher crossed the line, spikes draped around each neck like a priest's stole.

Should I get some spikes? They looked so cool.

I stared at Dave Eastman as he pulled off his flats, wondering if I could ever be as good as him. Just then he looked up, raised a fisted hand and smiled. I turned to look behind. There was no one there. I turned back to him. He pointed at me and nodded, giving me a thumbs up.

Chick pulled us together after the last sophomore crossed the line.

"Great job fellas! That was a nice way to start the season. They beat us 14-22 but we'll get better. Don't worry. Now do a cool down twice around the course."

We started to walk away. "Oh, and don't forget to take your salt tablets. It's hot out here today. You all sweated a lot."

As I turned to join the team, Chick tapped me on the shoulder. "Nice job Jim."

I couldn't hold back the smile.



Kevin and I went to the football game against Cedar Rapids Kennedy that Friday night. We sat off to the side in the stands away from the main crowd of supporters. My other neighborhood friends were on the football team and absorbed cheers from the adoring crowd, so I was glad to at least have Kevin by my side. As inconsequential as his presence may have seemed, it was better than being the loser who sat alone.

We stared wantonly at the shapely cheerleaders as they went through the mechanical routines, asking the crowd to, "make some

noise," hoping to create enthusiasm I didn't feel. They never glanced our way.

At halftime it was fun to point out mistakes made by the marching band: trombone players running into each other, a drummer pivoting in the wrong direction, off-key notes from the horn section that made me cringe. Kevin and I had watched them on many of our mornings runs, so it seemed permissible to make some snide remark about this week's show. We walked back home across the baseball diamond after the game, wondering what it would be like to date a cheerleader, watching for hoods lurking in the darkness of the school grounds.



In early October I was still undefeated in sophomore races, even at the big weekend meets in Davenport and Cedar Rapids. I was beginning to develop some confidence in my ability, expecting to be up front every race. It was about the only thing I expected to do well. But I still couldn't escape the nagging feeling even this would collapse like a house of cards.

I was thrilled to see my name in the *Little Hawk News*, but senior Dave Eastman was getting the headlines, even though it was a small story at the bottom of the back page. He continued to acknowledge my victories after meets, even pointing at my new Avanti spikes with a thumbs up.

Tuesday, we had our last dual meet of the season against CR Washington. This was the one Chick had talked about all year: a race against the top team in our area. The Warrior varsity and sophomore teams were expected to dominate the Mississippi Valley Conference this fall, just as they had done for the past three years. Their varsity had a great tradition, winning eight of the previous ten years, second the other two seasons and undefeated this year.

I won the sophomore race against the CR Washington team, leading from start to finish and winning by over fifteen seconds. It was

flat terrain, so I felt comfortable running 5:05 for the first mile and picking up the tempo the last half mile. My sophomore teammates ran the best race of the year and we won, finishing first-second-sixth-ninth to best last year's conference champions by one point.

We had come a long way as a team. The first meet, we ran like a bunch of school kids, timid and nervous, but today we demonstrated dedication and the hard work paid off.

Kevin was our sixth man, one of the pushers for the first time this year and turned in his best 1½-mile time. He crossed the line with a huge smile on his face.

He slapped my hand at the back of the chute, displaying a confidence I had rarely seen from him. As we began the team cooldown, he began singing "Popeye the Sailor Man" in a voice that hadn't yet gone through puberty. Everyone laughed as Kevin turned towards us after the last note, his face awash in a goofy smile.

"Jim. Why don't you join us on the long run today?" Dave looked over his shoulder as we exited the gym door on Monday.

I was shocked. He had a smile that lit up his face, wavy hair covering the top of his ears with sideburns that were even longer, and a beaded leather necklace that exuded cool. Dave was everything I wanted to be: talented and self-assured with an aloofness that girls loved.

Usually the sophomores and JV's did their Monday run as a group, and the varsity went their own way. I couldn't get over that he wanted me to join them. This was like the Homecoming Queen asking me out on a date.

"Sure," I replied timidly. I turned to the sophomores and gave them a shrug.

Dave turned to the varsity. "Let's do the Sea cup route."

He smirked at Fomby. Jack Wilson laughed. "My favorite loop."

Fomby frowned but said nothing. He typically had a retort for everything. Something was up. There was always some smart-ass reply, his charm so effective he could sell snake oil. Today he was meek as a mouse.

I followed behind, uncertain about which route they meant. We headed off across the parking lot, turned right on Court Street and down the hill into the distance. I followed at the rear, listening to the jokes and easy banter, conscious of my presence in this elite group.

Fomby finally found his voice. "Do we have to go by her house?"

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. We turned right on 1st Avenue and the guys pointed at a small white home on the corner with a clothesline to the side. Everyone but Fomby laughed like they were in junior high.

Dave made a sudden dash across the street. Everyone followed except Fomby, a scowl plastered on his face. Dave turned and yelled over his shoulder in a falsetto voice, "See you Grace!"

There was a lull in the conversation as we headed north on Keokuk Street. This was one weird route. Conversation slowed as we pushed up the hill on Kirkwood Avenue.

"I'm curious," I started timidly, afraid no one wanted to hear me speak. But I had to know. "How did you get the two Washington guys to chase after you last Thursday? I mean, they could have ignored the surges and stuck together. I couldn't believe how stupid they were."

Jack turned around with a big grin on his face. "Dave, you tell him."

"After we passed the mile split, I ran at Rush's side, you know, the Washington captain, and looked over and called him a pussy." Dave spit and laughed. "I said he didn't have the balls to catch me. Then Jack and I took off on the first surge. I was staring back at him the whole way."

"I wondered. I couldn't figure out why you kept looking back." Jack cut in.

"So, when he didn't respond we slowed down until we were beside him again. Dave was staring at Rush the whole time. You could see how pissed he was."

Dave continued. "Then I called him out. I said, 'See Rush, you are a pussy. I knew you didn't have the balls.' Then I nodded at Jack and we surged again." Jack slapped Dave on the shoulder and snickered.

“So then Rush shouts at Dave, ‘Fuck you’ and chases after us. Rill, his teammate, followed. He didn’t know what to do. Anyway, we just kept toying with them the last mile, slowing down and yelling ‘pussy’ whenever he got close. Dave and I smoked him the last straight, carrying out Chick’s plan to a T.” Jack slapped Dave’s hand and they both laughed. “But don’t tell Chick.”

We got through the eight miles and were back at the school before I realized it. As we headed into the gym, Dave turned to me. “You going to meet us Sunday for the run?”

“Yeah, sure...where do you meet? What time?”

“In front of the school at the Statue of Liberty, 8:00 a.m.”

The seniors asked me to run with them on the weekend. Cool.

Though mention of the statue brought back bad memories. Three hoods who had cornered us last summer at the Red & White Carnival.

Rodney Chambers, Kevin McBride and I had been walking around the fair, taking in all the sights and sounds on a late summer evening in mid-May: the bright lights, pretty girls, and rides we planned to try—the Octopus, Cups and Saucers. As we traipsed around the grounds making stupid comments to each other, our thoughts were on anything but a group of hoods watching us from across the festival. We were unaware we were being separated from the herd like a pack of wolves looking for their next meal.

As we stared at the rifle range targets near the edge of the festival, they half pushed, half intimidated us towards the back of the tents away from the crowd. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. *Fuck*. I was scared shitless. We stood in the dark shadows of the carnival, huddled in a tight cluster for protection, shaking in our shoes. We were going to get the crap beat out of us. It took all my courage not to cry.

I can still hear the nasal voice and see his weasel eyes. The oldest, Bowenkamp, sneered and pointed. “You can either get the shit kicked out of you or you can run down to the statue and give her a big kiss on the mouth, then come back with a quarter for each of us. What’s it

gonna be?" He held up his fist. "Either way you better decide quick." He smiled at our discomfort.

I was gone before he said another word. Rodney and Kevin took off right behind, afraid they'd get left to more abuse if they didn't get started. They watched us jump up and kiss the statue, illuminated by the lone spotlight, then sprint back up the hill towards the threesome. I was the first back, pulling the quarter out of my pocket as I ran.

Bowenkamp's palms hit my chest like a cannonball, and I slammed into the ground like a fallen plank, gasping for air. It happened so quickly I couldn't figure out how I'd ended flat on the grass. His partners did the same to Rodney and Kevin. I cowered on the ground, afraid to move, afraid there was more to come, expecting he would kick me with his boots. I dreaded looking at them, scared a knife would be displayed if I did.

Bowenkamp glared at us. "If I see any of you here tomorrow afternoon, we won't be so nice."

He glared especially hard at me. They picked up the quarters off the ground and walked away laughing, leaving us to wallow in our shame. We stayed on the ground until they slid through the tents and were out of sight.

I stood up and dusted myself off, afraid to look at Rodney or Kevin. No one said a word. I checked left and right to see if anyone had noticed what had happened, embarrassed by my cowardice. As if on cue, Rodney turned towards his house on Court Street as Kevin and I headed down Morningside Drive towards home.

I kept checking over my shoulder the entire way. The terror in my gut is still there any time the statue is mentioned, the same pallid feeling as that unforgettable day.



I could feel fall in the air with the low sun and the cooler temperatures, but despite it being in the mid-fifties, I knew the brisk air was what I was going to need to get through this Sunday run. The

maples were changing their colors to reds and yellows, the oaks already brown as we headed west on College Street, the group of seven cresting the hill at Summit Street for a destination unknown.

As we neared downtown, I could feel the pace picking up slightly, probably under seven minutes per mile. It was easy; we were loosening up and the faster tempo felt natural. Jack turned left at Gilbert Street and we headed south. It was the Quarry Run. I'd never gone ten miles in my life, and certainly not at a sub-seven pace. *Whoa doggie.*

As we went down Gilbert Street with a slight wind at our back, Jack broke the silence. "Did you guys hear about the protestors who stormed the Pentagon yesterday?" Jack's brother had taken off for Canada a year ago to avoid the draft. "On the news last night, they said there were 50,000 people at the rally. More than 500 got arrested. They had footage and you could see that it was crazy."

"Right on." Dave nodded. "I'm with the protestors. Nixon has no business putting troops in southeast Asia. I can't see why he's sacrificing Americans for such a stupid cause. It's pointless." Dave shook his head and then resumed. "You guys know Jeff Johnson, don't you? He's a senior on the football team. Well, his older brother Steve, was killed there last summer. I knew him. He was on the cross country team two years ago. I used to run with him every day. Now he's dead. It really freaks me out."

We continued south on Gilbert and contemplated what Dave said. Vietnam was rapidly becoming a part of everyone's life.

It was quiet for the next two blocks. We caught the light and crossed Highway 6 heading out towards the old stone quarry. The pace was 6:45. With each step out, we were adding to the distance back. We went out this way to visit our cousins, so I knew exactly where we were. Stopping at County Road E. five miles into the run we did an about-face and paused to catch our breath. We turned and headed back into town.

The first few steps were difficult to get back on the 6:45 pace, but within seconds I was fine. Our group of seven ran on the shoulder of the asphalt road facing into traffic, keeping a wary eye for an

aggressive farm dog or pesky red-winged black birds. The aroma of manure drifted in and out as we slid by row after row of yellowed corn stalks.

The tempo crept up ever so slightly, probably close to a 6:30 pace. I could take it, but I also knew the three fifty-yard rises, which had seemed so easy going out, were going to seem like three mountains on the way back. Conversation ceased except the occasional banter between Dave and Jack as they recounted Saturday's race.

Going into the first hill, Marquez and the three seniors maintained the same speed despite the climb. I held my position in the trailing group of three as we crested the first small hill, telltale signs in my breathing making it clear that the worst was ahead. The downhill helped me recover, but in a quarter of a mile we would be at hill number two.

I took the first steps up the incline and my heavy breathing immediately resumed, the four up front pulling away as I struggled to stay with Matt O'Hara and Steve Wilkinson. Inches at a time the pair separated themselves from my best effort, opening a thirty-yard gap before I had reached the top. I had no response as we ran down the hill, fatigue stealing my courage with every step. I knew I couldn't keep it up much longer.

Two-thirds of the way up the last hill I hit my breaking point. It was over. I was gassed. I didn't have the strength to fight it anymore. As I staggered to the top and glanced down the last hill, I caught Dave turning to look over his shoulder, curious as to how far the rest of the team lagged. I had nothing left. Even the downhill didn't seem to help. A bottle rocket with no gunpowder. Two miles from home and I didn't know how I was going to make it back.

If I broke twenty minutes the last two miles I would have been surprised. I was running on fumes. Even the gentle rise towards the school was more than I could handle. When I got back to the Statue of Liberty I wanted to collapse on the ground, but pride wouldn't let me. I was embarrassed to run so poorly the first time I joined them.

Maybe I wasn't as good as I thought. I slowed to a stop and stared at the ground.

"How was it?" Dave waved to Jack as he headed for home. I glanced up, uncertain if he was talking to me.

"I got my butt kicked." My eyes dropped back to the ground. "I thought I was ready, but I guess not."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. It's happened to all of us at one time. Keep putting in work like you did today and it will pay off."

I turned to walk home, but Dave stopped me. "Jim. I can tell you're discouraged. Don't worry about it. You're going to be a factor on the team before the season is over. I promise. Hang in there."

"Thanks."

I stared at the sidewalk, dissatisfied with my effort, afraid they would never ask me back. It was humbling to go from the best sophomore to the worst varsity runner. As I shuffled down College Street, I replayed the words Dave said: "You're going to be a factor on the team."

He would never know how much his kind words meant after such a lackluster run. I was discouraged, although maybe even more tired. I smelled burning leaves from somewhere in the neighborhood. With his faith in me and a little patience, I was convinced I could be a good runner. Time would tell.



Every Thursday we had a short team meeting after the workout to go over the meet ahead - the type of course, the competition we would face, and the team strategy we would use. Typically, Chick would talk with the sophomore squad first, then let us head into the weight room for pull-ups and sit-ups while he talked to the junior varsity and varsity teams.

Today he had the JV and varsity go first. I started to walk away with the rest of the sophomores, but he caught my attention. "Gatens, stay around for a second."

He turned to the team. "OK, quiet down and listen up. We head up to Ellis Park on Saturday morning for the MVC Meet. The school bus will leave at 8:00 a.m., so if you're late, you're not running." He stared at O'Hara. "Sophomore race at ten, JV race at ten-thirty, and varsity at eleven. You've all run Ellis Park a million times, so you know the course."

Chick scanned the JV squad. "Steve and Mark Miller, Chambers, Phillips, Wilkinson, and Kennedy will be running the JV race. I want all of you to go through the first mile as a pack, right around 5:10, then Wilkinson and Phillips work together and move up to the front of the race. I expect a team score of under twenty-five points or there will be a five-mile run for you guys after the meet." Chick glared at the JV team. "Do I make myself clear?"

Everyone nodded. Then he turned towards the varsity team. "The varsity..."

At that moment, it hit me. I had expected him to call my name for the JV team. Even though I had never run head-to-head with any of the junior varsity runners in a meet, I had run far faster times in meets and practices than the Miller twins (who I could not tell apart), Wilkinson, Kennedy, Chambers, and Phillips.

That's why Chick asked me to stay around. I wasn't running the sophomore race. I was running varsity!

"...will be using a different strategy. I want Dave and Jack to take the lead from the gun, pull Schultz from Jefferson and Mohr from Dubuque and the entire Washington team through half mile at 2:24. At the mile I want you two to trade thirty-yard surges—Wilson you first, then Eastman. See if you can break them down. You know, like you did last time."

Dave and Jack looked at each other and smiled. Chick continued. "I want the rest of our pack, Fomby, Marquez, O'Hara, and Gatens," he nodded at me, "steady as she goes from start to finish—5:10 pace the whole way with Fomby leading this group." I nodded as he spoke, absorbing every word. "None of you guys are strong enough to mix paces, so if you can keep the tempo even, we will be in decent shape.

See if Washington's top four go after our two hares and then you three will catch as many as you can the last half mile. If you stick with the plan, we can pull off an upset." Chick rubbed his hands together and smiled. "Okay, get a shower."

And just like that, we won. East High thirty-seven, Washington thirty-nine. Fomby passed Wash's number four and Marquez their number five runner on the last straight as the Warriors struggled into the finish. If Fomby hadn't caught them, Washington would have won 37-39. But the strategy worked, and we were MVC Champions!

It didn't matter that I had given up a shot at the sophomore title to finish nineteenth in varsity competition. I didn't care that Ray Clancy got the medal. I was the only sophomore in the varsity race! The experience was worth the sacrifice.

Eight weeks ago, I ran my first cross country race. Now I was a member of the Mississippi Valley Conference Championship team. It was so cool to stand up on the riser and hold the team trophy. To be in the team picture. To stare at my face on the back page of the *Little Hawk*: Jim Gatens—sophomore. I wouldn't have dreamt such a scenario even a week ago.

Chick chose me to run at the State Meet, happy with my performance at conference. I was excited to travel with the team in the station wagon, even though it was tight quarters for me. O'Hara and Marquez were in the front bench seat, three seniors in the middle, and me, the rookie, sat sideways in the rear storage area of the station wagon. I was so glad to be a part of the group that I really didn't mind the uncomfortable position for the seventy-five-minute drive.

Chick tuned the AM radio to a Country Western station playing Conway Twitty, George Jones, Hank Williams and the Carter Family all the way to Marshalltown. The only song I enjoyed was by the Statler Brothers singing "Flowers on the Wall".

It wasn't as fun coming home after the championship meet. Dave and Jack did well—second and seventh in the state, but as a team we were flat as a pancake. It was a disappointing end to the season,

but one I would always remember—although it was Chick’s classic line that made it memorable and not the race.

After the awards ceremony he pulled us aside before we got in the station wagon.

“Boys, instead of coming home with a trophy... we’ll only be coming home with a dick in our hand.”

He smiled and walked away. We were shocked. Then everyone burst out laughing. A classic line, and it summed up the results well: eighth place and easily beaten by Cedar Rapids Washington. It was the wrong ending to a successful season, but we had all worked our butts off and no one could say we hadn’t tried our best.

I realized on the ride home that coming out for cross country was one of the best decisions in my life. No matter what anyone else would have called me, I was a runner.

Chapter 3

November 15, 1999

The Saturday after our soccer loss to Stagg, Marie and I drove out to Dick Pond Athletics to get fitted with a new pair of running shoes. Typically, I would have picked up a pair at Sportmart, ignorant about cushioning or how to fit shoes properly, but understood how important they would be in my success.

“Okay, so what size do you wear and what are you going to use your shoes for?” The clerk gave me one of those looks that said, “this guy is clueless.” I had never actually spoken the words out loud.

“Size 10½ and I’m training to run the mile.”

I cringed inwardly at my bold words, amazed they had come out so easily. It was like eating the corner brownie from a pan, realizing you couldn’t put it back. My statement suddenly made it real. He had me take off my shoes and walk away and then towards him as he examined my feet.

“I’ll be right back.”

I walked over to the section with track spikes, lifting pairs off the display, amazed how light they were. Marie smiled at me but didn’t say a word.

The clerk came back with four boxes, set them down in front of me and helped put on the first pair. I ran outside on the asphalt, doing the same with the other shoes, letting him know what I thought of each. The shoes felt great. Way better than soccer cleats.

I set the box on the counter and pulled out a credit card, suddenly aware of what I was doing. The purchase made it official. I don’t know

why, but when we left the store, I gave Marie a big hug, coming to grips with a new reality. I was a runner. Well, at least for now.

In mid-November when I first began my training, it had been easy to get up at six in the morning on school days and follow the same routine—north on Rt. 45 then east towards the zoo, in the afternoons off by myself through the Riverside neighborhoods.

The change of routine made it exciting, yet I obsessively avoided the intrusive eyes of my soccer teammates, Coach Kozak, or anyone on the track team. I didn't want questions or even the slightest hint of what I was doing in case the plan didn't work. I worried I might be doing the wrong things, but it didn't stop me from training.

As December arrived and conditions worsened, I faced my first real challenge of running. Temperatures were dropping, the mornings feeling more like winter than fall, and I struggled to get out of the warm bed. It was as tough as sticking a swollen ankle in an ice bath. I didn't wake up with the same enthusiasm I had three weeks earlier, the thought of thirty additional minutes of sleep much more appealing than thirty minutes of cold.

Fatigue became a constant companion, my eight hours of repose turning into nine as bedtime steadily crept closer to nine o'clock. I questioned my sanity daily, wondering if I had made a good choice. The miles were sapping my resolve.

The last Friday before Christmas, temperatures had dropped dramatically overnight, the wrath of winter striking me like a mountain avalanche as I turned into the wind. I lowered my head when a strong northwest gust pushed my trunk erect. It felt like I was running in place. Wind shot up my sleeves and down my neck, making me shiver despite the warmth of my stocking hat. The bitter cold told me I should have put on one more layer.

I laughed as I fondly recalled Dad's adage about sledding on cold winter days when I was nine or ten—"It's a one-sock day."



"So, when are you going to tell Coach Kozak about joining the track team?" Marie looked at me as we drove up Rt. 83 towards the mall.

"I don't want to tell anyone until I know I'm ready." I was uncertain when that moment would be. "When do you think I should let him know?"

"There's no reason to tell him until the first team meeting. Is there? When is it?"

"The day after MLK Day. It makes me nervous to think about. I don't have a clue how fast I can run."

Maybe I was making a stupid decision. *Maybe I should stick to soccer.* But then I recalled my disappointment last November and I got angry.

"Remember, don't tell anyone about this."

"Chill out!" Marie looked like she was going to strangle me. "I won't tell a soul. But it's going to be hard to fool your mom."

"No, I already thought of that. I told my her I've gotta be the best conditioned soccer player in the state if we are to get further in the tournament."

"This is exciting. I'm glad you decided to do this. I think you are going to surprise a lot of people." Marie smiled. "Coach Kozak will certainly be happy!"

Marie was the constant, the person I could always rely on to provide support at times when I struggled and doubted myself. I honestly don't know if I would have made it through the training without her daily encouragement and positive attitude. She was always there when I was tired of the cold and she was there when I questioned my sanity.

The last day of winter break we got together for pizza and drove down to Palos for an ice cream at the Plush Horse. Marie took a lick of Rocky Road.

"What did you get on the Chemistry mid-term?"

"I got an 81 percent, but on my first test in late October I didn't do so good." Marie handed me the cone. "I'll probably get a C, a C+

if I'm lucky, despite all the help you gave me. Coach Kozak makes a point of never giving an athlete a break, so there's no chance to get a B. At least I'm getting A's in English and History. And maybe in Spanish if I do well on the final."



January 6, 2000

Thursday night before finals began, Marie and I went to the city library to study, both of us desperate for a change of scenery. I was tired from all the training and my concentration was fading fast, especially in Chemistry. Finals started Monday, and I needed to put in more cram time or I wouldn't even get a C. The lights dimmed for a second and then came back on.

"Either the library is closing," I smiled, "or that was last call."

The start of the season was ten days away. As if she read my mind Marie asked, "What kind of shape do you think you're in?"

"It's hard to tell." I really wasn't sure. "I know I'm in much better shape than when I started in November. But if you asked me to guess a time for a mile, I'd be hard pressed to give an accurate estimate... so... I was wondering...could you meet me at the fieldhouse Monday before school and time me in a mile? Neither of us have a final until ten." I gave her my best smile.

"Of course."

"I'm going to change when we get to school, warm up outside, and then be ready to go at seven. All I want you to do is read me the splits. Ten laps for a 1600m and my goal is 4:40, so I should hit twenty-eight seconds each lap. Maybe I'm dreaming, but I think I can run this fast."

I stood at the line in a t-shirt and soccer shorts, watching the janitor back towards me, his shoulders swinging side-to-side as he mopped the entrance area of the fieldhouse. Looking down at my

training shoes I wished I could have borrowed some racing flats, but I wanted to keep any hint of this to myself. I toed the line, looked over to Marie and nodded.

I stood posed, staring at the ground, waiting for her mark. She raised her arm.

“Go!”

I took off rapidly, quickly building speed, feeling the strain on my lower limbs as I circled the first corner. *Here we go.*

As I neared the line on the first lap Marie shouted, “Twenty-four... twenty-five...twenty-six...” from lane three.

Dang. I knew I was a little fast, but I convinced myself two seconds wouldn't be a problem. Next lap: “Fifty...fifty-one...fifty-two...”

Shit! Still too quick. I mentally shrugged my shoulders. It wasn't like I was going to die. Was I?

Warmth began to embrace my body as the muscles heated up, the eighteen degrees outside leaving my skin cold to the touch. My breathing fell into a steady pattern, deeper but more relaxed.

“1:16...1:17...1:18...” *Shit*, a twenty-seven second lap. I wasn't tired yet but knew there would be a price for my impatience.

There was a good chance I might have stepped off the track, but I felt bad making Marie get up early, so I pressed on despite an overwhelming desire to quit. I stared at her hand as she finally showed one finger, pulling her towards me like a fisherman reeling in a catch. 160 meters to go.

God, I was dead. *Why did I decide to do this?* I didn't know if I could make it. No amount of running in soccer had ever hurt this bad.

An internal monologue took over: *Just keep your legs moving. Get down the backstretch one more time. Okay, see what you have the last eighty meters. C'mon.* I struggled to stay tight on the inside line and drove my arms as hard as I could into the finish.

I flew by Marie, watching her hand go down in my peripheral vision as she matched the stopwatch to my body crossing the line. I stopped immediately, putting hands on my knees, waiting for the pain to subside. My mouth was as dry as a desert, saliva caught in

my throat like shredded wheat. I thought the worst pain was behind, but it continued when I stood tall, as though it had been trailing five yards behind and finally caught up. My chest rose in a steady rhythm, breaths coming in rapid bursts.

Marie skipped over to me yelling something, but I was too tired and in too much pain for it to register. My breathing finally slowed, and I turned my head to look at her, the hollowness in both ears finally gone, her words beginning to register in my brain.

“Jim. Jim...you ran 4:29!” She hopped up and down as if she had won the lottery. “Look at the indoor school record on the board...4:24.4. You only missed it by five seconds! Your first attempt at the 1600 and you’re almost the best the school ever had!”

I broke out in a big smile. All doubt was gone. At that moment I knew I was ready to tell Coach Kozak I was going to be running track. Finish finals, MLK Day off on Monday, and then the first practice on Tuesday.

Chapter 4

November 27, 1967

“You interested in running an indoor meet at the University of Chicago? It’s right before Christmas.” My face lit up as I nodded. Dave continued as students rushed back and forth between classes. “Oh, and we’re going to stop out in Glen Ellyn on the way back on Sunday. There’s a store that has running shoes. Bring money if you are interested in getting a pair. I’m going to get some Tigers. I think they’re called Limbers. They’re cool. White with blue and red design.” He grinned. “I may even buy two pairs.”

The thought of owning a real running shoe was exciting. The Converse All-Stars I used all cross country season were killing my feet. I walked like an old man after every run, the pounding on my legs like a jackhammer each foot strike. There was a hole over my big toe on both shoes and the rubber tread at the heel was worn down to nothing. I had to run almost exclusively on grass, or my feet were sore all day.

I’d seen pictures of the Tiger shoes in the *Track & Field News* Chick had in his PE office, but there were none to be found anywhere in Iowa. I considered buying a second pair, but twenty-four dollars was out of my price range. And I wasn’t going to sell my coin collection. Yet.

I sat in Mrs. Lowman’s English class minutes later thinking about the meet, suddenly nervous. I hadn’t run more than fifty miles since the cross country season ended four weeks ago and now it was four

days short of December 1. I had three weeks to get ready for the first indoor race of my career. *What in the hell was I thinking?*



"I'm stoked about getting some new Tigers." Fomby leaned forward from the back seat to fiddle with the radio as Dave drove us the four hours to Chicago. "My Adidas are on their last leg. I have holes over the big toe on both shoes, and they're cracked from all the slop we've been running in the last few weeks."

"So, I'm curious, is your cousin hot?" Dave turned his head towards Fomby. "I hope she has no resemblance to you." We all laughed. "Doing the nasty with your pug looking back at me..." Dave leered. "Yikes."

"If you're asking if she puts out, the answer is no." Fomby finally got WLS on the radio and leaned back. "She has a nice rack, but she's only in ninth grade. You'd get locked up if you messed with her."

I found the courage to ask a question that stuck in my head since last October. "What's the story behind the Sea Cup route? Where did that name come from?"

Jack cut in. "Dave, let me tell the story. It's 'C-cup' as in brassiere, not s-e-a." He turned to look back at me over his shoulder. "Our sophomore year, Fomby had the hots for a girl in his Spanish class. Grace Schultz." Jack grinned. "She had a pair of knockers on her men die for."

He gave Fomby a smirk. "Anyway, on our eight-mile run one day he made us go by her home. He was hoping to get a peek at the pair from her bedroom window. So, when we get to her house there's a bra hanging on the clothesline, flapping in the wind. Dave starts going over, you know, acting like he's going to take it."

Dave cut in. "Actually, I wanted to try it on."

We laughed. Jack continued. "Fomby was pulling him away and all the guys were laughing their asses off. He could see Grace at the window with a big frown on her face. Anyway, ever since then, we've

called it the 'C-cup route.' And that was as close as Fomby ever got to them!"

We all roared. Fomby didn't.

I'd been on a dirt indoor track at the university but never raced on one. We warmed up outside on the streets of Hyde Park, running in a four-by-four block square so we didn't get lost in the unfamiliar neighborhood. There was a foot of snow on the ground with a cloudy sky that foretold more, temperatures in the upper twenties.

When we got back inside the fieldhouse Dave turned to me. "Did you put in the half-inch spikes? The clay surface won't be too torn up, so you can stick with shorter ones today. You know, instead of the one-inchers."

I pulled out my Adidas Avantis and the plastic wrench from the bottom of my gym bag. The rust-covered spikes were still encrusted in mud, a remnant of the State Meet. Dave dropped eight half-inch spikes in my hand as I sat against the fieldhouse wall, removing the long ones with the blue wrench. Four in the right shoe, four in the left, and then it was time to race. It felt good to step back into the shoes and compete.

As I walked towards the starting line, I looked down the short straight, amazed at the quantity of dust floating in the air, the scene reminding me of Pig Pen in *Charlie Brown* and the dust of countless ages.

A white-haired Irish-looking guy waved his hand above his head and yelled out, "MILERS...over here."

As we assembled the smell of analgesic balm rolled at us like a wave, overwhelming any scent of B.O. from the rest of the field. The odor reminded me of the Bengay Dad used whenever his back hurt. I eyed the runners, trying to determine who brought it over. The offensive smell was coming from the stocky runner rubbing one hamstring and the other as he listened attentively to the official. Everyone backed slightly away.

"OK, listen up. Any of you that can break 4:30, step over here." He pointed at a spot.

A group of us, including Dave and I, shuffled over. "One-two-three-four-five-six-seven. OK, let's get two or three more. How many can break 4:34?"

Four more raised their hands and stepped forward. "Good. Now we have eleven. OK, you guys are heat one."

Five minutes later he raised the starting pistol. "Runners set..." *BANG!* and we were off.

My first indoor meet. I had no idea about pace, a predicted time, or what the competition would do. All Dave said was to make sure I got in the fast section. So, I lied, pretending 4:29 was my PR. I was trapped in the pack of runners on the initial backstretch, encircled by the field like a participant in a schoolyard fight, swept along in a tidal wave of arms and legs. I had second thoughts about being in the fast heat. Maybe I should have chosen the slower one.

Staring at the back of the maroon jersey just in front, I circled the track, wondering how much more I could take of the scrub brush running up and down in my throat. God was I tired. The crack of the pistol was a welcome relief, like the sound of the bathroom door opening for a man with a full bladder. I increased my tempo and charged hard into the last 220, my lungs screaming for me to stop.

Thirty-three seconds later I crossed the line to the lap counter yelling, "4:37...4:38...4:39."

I quickly decelerated and leaned forward with hands on my knees, waiting for my breathing to slow.

Dave came over and patted me on the back. "I think you were about 4:39. I circled back to see if I could catch it."

He pointed out the water fountain and we shuffled over to get some liquid into our parched throats. I ran a 4:39 in my first meet. *Cool.* More importantly, Dave was pleased with my effort. His respect meant more to me than he would ever know.

We threw on our sweats and did a twenty-minute cooldown outside, the plummeting temperatures producing puffs of steam as we ran around the edges of Washington Park.

Back in the fieldhouse, Dave pointed out the Heisman Trophy in the glass case and we headed to the locker room for a shower. I stripped off my socks, shocked at the amount of dirt on my legs. My feet were white as snow, but my calves were engulfed in brown.

I stood under the warm stream of water and blew snot out of my nose. It was a good day.



I don't know what possessed me to give Patty Murray a bottle of Wind Song perfume before Christmas on our date to see *Planet of the Apes*. But I did. She was SO happy. I wanted to thank her for all the help she had given me in Chemistry during the fall and this gift seemed like the right gesture. Her reaction took me by surprise. It was like watching a five-year-old open a present. She gave me a huge smile, an emphatic hug, and a thank you that was quite sincere.

We sat next to each other the first day of Chemistry class and somehow ended up working together as lab partners. On some level, I knew this might not have been a coincidence, but I hated Chemistry and she promised to help.

When I asked her to study with me for the first test in early October, she was amazingly eager. I got the impression she wondered why it had taken me so long to ask, but then again, I was clueless. Reading a girl's mind was even harder than interpreting a chemistry equation.

We studied at the city library because it was too awkward to go to her house, and I certainly didn't want to be under the watchful eyes of my parents or siblings. The fact I had chosen the city library to study was out of practicality, but I quickly learned she had agreed so readily for other reasons. Patty always made a point to say hi to her girlfriends before sitting down, grabbing the attention of other girls as she sauntered over and sat beside me.

I had never dated before, so everything about this was certainly a new experience. I felt like a first-year violinist thrown in with the

New York Philharmonic. I was the wallflower at junior high dances, the one who leaned back against the wall and made snide remarks under his breath.

I finally asked Patty out the second Friday in October, hoping she was interested in going to the Putt-Putt Golf Course. It took me a day to find the courage, making the call from a downtown phone booth so no one would be listening to me fumble through the invitation. I was walking on clouds all the way home.

Ultimately it was Patty who asked me to Homecoming. She was tired of being subtle and tired of listening to Sally's excitement without any of her own to share. We double-dated with her friend, sharing the backseat of a station wagon as we rode to the party at the school gymnasium. Patty hugged me when I gave her the wrist corsage, the stiff crinoline dress puckering as she leaned forward, showing me a hint of cleavage that might be mine.

I rode the rest of the way with her hand wrapped around mine, the hormones oozing from our bodies. The rest of the evening went by in a flash, highlighted by slow dances in tight embraces, her body language encouraging me to put my hands lower than her back.

As we pulled up to my house I leaned over to Patty, uncertain if I was to kiss her on the cheek or the mouth. She tilted her head to mine and our lips touched, her tongue exploring my mouth with a short kiss I would not soon forget. I said goodnight, telling her I had a great time. I floated through the front door and upstairs into bed.

We continued to date and spent most of our following Fridays and Saturdays together, although I could tell she was put off by my requests to get my sleep the night before Sunday runs.



Our small group of runners—Eastman, Wilson, Fomby, and O'Hara—had resumed our team get togethers at East High on Sunday's after the UCTC Holiday Classic race. Ray Clancy joined us the second weekend after hearing of our group, his addition

improving our chances for a good cross country team the next two years. He had started the cross country season a decent runner, immediately number two on our sophomore team, but steadily closed the gap on my dominance, finishing the season as the MVC Sophomore Champion after I joined varsity.

It was a rare Sunday when there wasn't a driver yelling snide comments out the window as they passed, thinking they were the first ones to come up with some stupid line. Dave typically didn't get too worked up about it, not bothering to look at them, yet always made a point to extend the finger so they knew what he thought.

Near the end of a Sunday's run, tired and cold from wet snow pelting us in the face as we neared East High, a car slowed beside us with the window rolled down, the driver's shout flew at us like a dare.

"Hey dumb shits, why are you running in the snow?"

Fuck this guy. Without a thought, everyone bent over and scooped handfuls of wet snow, our fatigue disappearing in an instant as we sprinted towards the car with a renewed vigor, pelting the Chevy with a machinegun-like barrage from twenty yards away. He managed to roll up the driver's window just as we got close enough to toss one through.

The driver pulled farther ahead and jumped out of the car, screaming at the top of his lungs like we were the assholes. His action had the opposite effect. Most of us slowed, but Dave and Jack surrounded the car, whooping and hollering. They hit the car in a hail of snowballs before he sped off.

We laughed all the way back to the statue, energized by the encounter, recalling the *thunk* of the snowballs hitting the metal car door in a loud staccato beat, Dave's last salvo leaving an impression in the passenger door.

This incident described Dave to a T. He approached life with the same bravado, rushing headlong into any fray, taking no prisoners when the moment asked for it. Yet he was as compassionate as a mother, willing to give you the shirt off his back if needed. It was

cool to be a part of his life. I wasn't going to mess this arrangement up for anything. Or so I thought.



Patty and I met at Harmony Hall Records one Saturday over Christmas break, checked out five '45s from the clerk, and went into the glass booth on the far side to listen. When I closed the door, the scent of her perfume and our body contact created an intimacy that sent my hormones into high gear. I held the sleeved records by the Strawberry Alarm Clock, Sam & Dave, The Monkees, Jefferson Airplane, and Sonny & Cher, slid each '45 out of the dust jacket, loaded it on the center post, and pushed the tone arm over.

We put on the headphones as the music began, looking over the pictures on each record jacket, swaying back and forth to the beat of every song. Cracks and pops introduced each new hit, followed by a sound like car tires rolling over gravel. We listened to the stack three times, trying to decide yes or no.

I didn't want to leave the booth, our proximity making it was hard to focus on the music. The psychedelic beat on "White Rabbit" and "Incense & Peppermint" were cool, but "The Beat Goes On" and "Daydream Believer" were hits she really liked. Patty didn't have much to say about "Soul Man," but I loved the horns, and it felt cool to listen to black music.

I walked halfway between the two roads and bought the Sonny & Cher record and the hit by the Jefferson Airplane. One for her and one me. I wasn't a huge fan of Sonny & Cher, but I hoped my gesture might pay off down the road.

As we walked out of the store, Patty grabbed my upper arm with both hands. "Let's go to the party tonight at Terri's. All my friends will be there. It will be fun." She gave me a big smile.

"How late will it go...because I have a run tomorrow at eight."

I want to be rested and ready. We were going ten miles for the first time since cross country.

Yet for as much as running consumed my life, I was amazed how quickly she could rearrange my priorities. Make me consider an option based entirely on hormones. Even though running was more important than a girlfriend, all it took was a smile or the touch of her hand for me to change my mind.

"Maybe we could see *Cool Hand Luke* instead." I gave it a shot. "It's at the Varsity Theater."

"Ah, c'mon," cooed Patty. "It's only running. Live it up a little. You never know how exciting things might get."

She put an arm around my waist and pulled me tight. She was my kryptonite. Impossible to resist. In a battle of hormones and running, she knew she would win out every time.

"OK, I'll go." I was defeated.

She smiled and grabbed my hand, swinging it back and forth as we walked towards the bus stop. She gave me a big hug as the bus pulled up. I jumped on, turned to give her a smile and waved. Staring out the window as the stores disappeared and houses slid by, I dreamed about how exciting things might get that night.

The bus made a sudden stop, and I was jolted out of my reverie. Had made the right decision? Would get home too late and not get the rest I needed for the Sunday run? It was a decision I would examine many, many times in the weeks ahead.

I didn't get home until almost two in the morning. When the alarm went off at seven thirty it felt like I had just closed my eyes. Patty and I made out at the party and in her car before she dropped me off, my hand brushing across her breasts once or twice, but right now I wasn't sure a taste of sex was worth it. Although, if you had asked me that question with her tongue in my mouth, I knew I would do it again.

Jogging up the street towards East High, rubbing the fatigue out of my eyes, I realized I'd succumbed to the forbidden fruit. Why had I done it? Girlfriends would come and go, but I had only one opportunity to be a State Champion. The choices seemed so unfair.

It was a Sunday run I'll never forget. But for the wrong reasons. We had a light snow overnight and the temperatures were in the upper 20s—a decent day for early January, but on the return from the Old Quarry it felt like I was dragging a fifty-pound sled. The five of them pulled away from me with three miles to go.

As we stretched at the Statue of Liberty after the run, Fomby smirked. "Gatens, you better have gotten some last night, because that was the crappiest Sunday run I've ever seen."

My face burned. I didn't say a word. I knew he was right.

At the first real increase in pace, I fell apart and the guys pulled away like I had fallen off a turnip truck. The look Dave gave me when I dropped fifty yards behind when they crossed Highway 6 was almost too much to acknowledge.

I was ashamed. I had let him down. He glanced at me after Fomby's comment, the slight shake of his head sending a message. *It's either us or her.*

All the way home I castigated myself, wondering how anyone could be expected to balance romance and running. I had no experience dealing with a relationship. There weren't any books or magazines or counselors that could tell me how to deal with it, and I certainly wasn't going to ask Mom or Dad. It would be much too embarrassing.

With each step I thought about how late I got home, replaying my mistake in an endless reel. The reminder only served to make me angrier. Eight hours later, the foolish decision clearly seemed so wrong.

Running I understood. If you weren't good, it was as simple as working harder, dedicating yourself more. As for dating, I didn't have a clue. My parents weren't ones to discuss feelings or show much emotion. I knew they loved each other, but it was rarely expressed with a hug or a kiss. I guess it was just assumed. When things weren't going well, I didn't know how they dealt with it.

Now, when I needed some guidance I was at a loss. I had to make a choice. And I knew what it would be.

Chapter 5

January 15, 2000

While Mom was reading the Sunday paper, I casually sat down at the bar stool around the kitchen island, trying to put together what I was about to say. I couldn't think of anything other than just blurt-ing it out.

"I've decided to try track this spring instead of doing club soccer."

"You're kidding. Really?" She laid the newspaper on the counter. "That would be great. Have you talked with the track coach?" I shook my head. "Who is it?"

"Coach Kozak. I'm just going to try it for a season and see how it goes. If it doesn't pan out, that's fine because I'll still be playing soccer next fall."

And that was it. She picked up the paper and smiled at me over the top of the Arts & Design section.



I stopped in Coach Kozak's office after my last final to ask him about the date for the first track meeting, even though I already knew the answer. He didn't seem as surprised as I had expected.

"We'll go over the team rules, practice schedule, medical information, and indoor meets. Then we'll break up into groups—jumps, throw, sprints and distance. What are you going to try out for?"

"I was thinking the mile." I was hesitant to look up. "I've been doing some endurance training, and with my soccer background, well, I feel I can handle that distance."

"Sounds good." He nodded. "I suspected that's what you would say because of your years of soccer. See you at 3:15 p.m. on Tuesday."



The second week of practice, Coach Kozak stood in front of the varsity distance group, preparing us for the first real workout on our indoor track. All day long I fretted this moment, afraid the veterans were going to kick my ass.

"Gentlemen, today we have ten 400-meter repeats. Three groups: Yount, Kehoe, Dent, Lee, and Gatens in the first one."

He sent us off for some strides and talked with the second and third groups. Brad Yount, the only senior in our group that left his IHSA State Finals shirt on, motioned for us to huddle up. Brett Dent, Zach Kehoe, and Carey Lee tossed their shirts towards the bleachers, so I follow suit.

"OK, let's trade the lead for each one. I'll take the first." He pointed around the circle. "Brett you got number two, Carey three, Jim, you take the fourth one, and Zach number five. Talk, so each guy leading knows he's on pace."

With that, I was off on the first interval workout, nervous about my performance. It felt like I was riding in a peloton. We circled the track in single file as I stared at a piece of lint caught in Kehoe's curly hair.

Now it was my turn to lead. I turned to make sure we were packed up and then jogged into the line, taking off like an escaped convict.

Yount yelled at me from behind. "DUDE! Slow down. We still have another one."

I passed my first big test. After a ten-minute cooldown around the track, Coach Kozak called us over. "Gentlemen, that was a nice

effort today. In about a month, you will realize this wasn't much, but this early in the season, I am very pleased. OK. Get some weights."

As we walked down to the weight room Dent turned to me. "You did a good job today."

"How will it translate to a race time?" I didn't have a clue what this workout meant.

Kehoe answered. "Let's put it this way. Last year, two weeks after this workout, Brad and Brett ran 4:27 at the Proviso Meet, and I ran 9:43. Carey broke 10:00 for the first time. All personal bests."

"So, these are pretty good this early in the season?" I wasn't sure. "Aren't they?"

"Yep, they're decent. So, if we stay healthy, we're going to see some fast times in two weeks."

We set our water bottles on the floor of the weight room and got started on the pull-ups.

"What do you guys think about Ray Lewis?" A voice came from nowhere. Cooney burst through the weight room door. "Another dumb NFL player or a guy in the wrong place at the wrong time? Personally, I think he's a fucking idiot!"

"Cooney's dropping the F-bombs." Dent grinned. "C'mon. Tell me how you really feel."

"That he's a narcissistic douchebag." Cooney smiled.

During the days following the workout, I had some tenderness on my heel. Kehoe loaned me an old pair racing flats for the workout, explaining I would run faster if I carried less weight, so I did. Unfortunately, they were half size too small.

Barely two weeks and I was hurt. *Dammit*. In soccer nothing slowed me down, but in track even the littlest soreness could sidetrack me. I needed to get out to Dick Pond and buy my own pair. We had our first real meet in ten days, so I iced the heel after the cooldown each day and ignored the pain. I woke each morning, praying it wouldn't be sore, but the walk to the bathroom told me otherwise. Most of the pain went away as the day went on, so I figured it would be fine, but as the week continued the soreness lasted longer into each day.

Monday before the Proviso meet, I went in before lunch to talk with Coach Kozak. The heel was really bothering me.

“Well, it sounds like you have a little plantar fasciitis.” By my quizzical look he could tell I didn’t know the term. “Soreness in the tendon across the bottom of your foot. We’re going to have to stick you in the pool for three to four days and see how it responds to the rest.”

“But what about the meet on Saturday at Proviso West?” I was worried I wouldn’t run.

“We’ll play it by ear, but to be honest, it will be a stretch to think you’ll be ready to compete.” Coach looked at me earnestly. “Let’s see about getting you out to Dr. Durkin. He’s a podiatrist who works with runners. I think he could make you some orthotics that solve your problem.”

I hadn’t been on the team a month and I was already injured. *This sucked.*

Three days in the pool and it was still sore when I crawled out of bed. The meet was off. I was as grumpy as an old man with hemorrhoids.

Marie decided a change of pace was needed, so on Friday night we drove out to Villa Park for a winter choral festival to get away from anything that might remind me of my setback. She had a friend performing a solo. We stopped at Dairy Queen for a chocolate shake afterwards and she drove me home.



Daniel Page’s teammate took him through 200-meter splits right on pace, the ease of the York runner clear to this novice. His pacer curled off to the outside of the track after the 1600-meter, the last half up to Page.

As he circled the track, I was transfixed by the efficiency of his mechanics, the carriage of his arms, the high recovery of his heels, the

relaxation on his face. It was hard to calculate how fast he was going, but with two laps remaining I heard the timer shouting "8:01."

I thought to myself that even though the time was going to be phenomenal, there was no way he was going to break 9:00. And I was right, but just barely: 9:00.81. The fastest in the State by twenty-one seconds and the second fastest in the nation according to *The Harrier* magazine we passed around.

I walked up to Zach Kehoe with a cup of water. "What'd you go through the 1600?" I looked at him sheepishly. "I'm embarrassed to admit I was so busy watching Page, I didn't catch your time."

"I was 4:44. And that was quick." Zach shook his head. "That dude's race was sick."

"Yeah, but you still ran a 9:36. Not bad for your first time this year."

I was able to resume running on the Sunday after the meet, but kept it to thirty minutes on the roads, and right into the pool for sixty minutes of freestyle intervals. Amazingly, I woke up Monday with no pain in the arch, but decided the constant turning on the indoor track was too hard on my legs. I stuck to the roads the next two weeks, turning in a good 4:28.4 at Morton West Fieldhouse the end of February.

The first weekend in March, some of the team was going out to Sterling for the invitational on the Westwood facility. My training had been good after the setback, replacing the intervals on the indoor track with lots of fast tempo work. Although it was clear I was ready to run fast on this 200-meter track, I was unnerved to be racing against some of the best runners in the state.

The Thursday before the meet, Coach Kozak cornered Dent and me in the fieldhouse after an easy eight miles and some strides, going over the race plan for the 1600 on Saturday.

We sat on the floor stretching while he talked. "Guys, this will be a fast race, and I want you two to work together. For the first 1,000 meters I want you side-by-side, no matter what pace the others do. I want splits of thirty-three seconds for the initial five laps."

Dent jumped in. "What if they go out at 2:06 or 2:08 for the 800 meters? Won't we be out of the race?"

"Yes." Coach smiled. "But I know from experience that this early in the season there will be a bunch of fools who go out way too fast. Most of the guys don't know how to select the tempo, especially in such a high-caliber field. So, don't be foolish. Stick with the plan, and you'll find with three laps to go, the pack will start coming back like a tired fish on the line."

Dent started to say something, but Coach Kozak's made it clear we were to listen. "Success comes to those who are patient. I know if you show me restraint, I expect to see both of you under the school record."

"But the record is 4:24.4. Do you really think we can run that fast?" Dent wasn't sure.

"I don't think you can. I know you can. Stick with the plan." He winked and walked towards the locker room.

Unable to fall back asleep, I got up at 6:40 a.m. Saturday morning to do a run before we left for Sterling. I was so nervous I needed a way to burn off my tension. Fifteen minutes later, I was in the shower and mentally preparing for the race. We wouldn't be competing until late in the meet, almost three, so I put granola bars and fruit in my backpack to get me through the day.

"What do you think of Coach Kozak's plan?" I was a bit uncertain.

"I'll admit it makes me nervous, but I'm willing to take the risk." Brett slowed and shot a snot rocket as we ran along Eberly Park. "Coach has rarely been wrong."

"I agree. We've been getting in good fartlek efforts on the hard workouts...but I'm not sure how it will translate."

"Don't worry. Just follow my lead." Brett looked up at the sky. "Dang. We could have run outside."

We changed into our spikes and went over to the clerk's table to check in. I stared at Page talking with Hickman and Snyder of Conant in the clerking line. Both had already run 4:21's indoors and were probably sharing plans with the York phenom for the race. His

presence got me excited, but I was also worried about how I would perform at my first big test.

Eight entrants in this field were already under 4:25 in the 1600-meter. We were numbers eleven and twelve in the twelve-man group. I was suddenly nervous, overwhelmed by the uncertainty ahead. Jogging over to the start with Dent, all I could think about was how embarrassing it would be to finish last. *What a way to start my career.*

We did a last stride around the corner and into the homestretch, slowing as we approached the starting line. I still didn't feel comfortable with the plan but was so inexperienced I would be foolish to do anything other than as Coach Kozak directed.

At the gun, Brett and I got pinched to the rear of our waterfall like a watermelon seed squeezed between a thumb and finger. Only Coach Kozak's shout of "EASY!" slowed us down. The four others in our row sprinted to get into an advantageous position, each one knocked around the cluster like a flipped pinball. We slid into the last two spots as the two waterfalls joined, Hickman and Snyder bursting to the front to take the initial lead. I couldn't identify many of the runners but was baffled to see Page right in front of Dent. Shouldn't he be up front?

Just follow Dent. He was a master of pace.

The Conant pair led the field through a twenty-nine-second first lap. We heard "32.7!" from Coach Kozak as we passed him on the corner. The ten gradually opened a gap on us, with Page on the tail end, periodically glancing back. Brett and I passed the 400-mark at 1:05.7, the pack continuing to pull away, now almost thirty meters ahead. Page was sitting on the back of the lead pack, continuing to look over his left shoulder on the corners. We stuck with Coach's plan despite the dread that filled my gut like a bad case of diarrhea. Dent and I were getting our asses kicked.

We were no closer to the leaders at the halfway point, although now the pack was stringing out, places six through ten only meters in front. On the backstretch, Page slid by the pack and moved into

third, just behind the two Cougars. We matched his move as runners faded, finally moving out of the last spots into ninth and tenth.

With three laps to go, Dent brought us through the last 1,000 meters and into sixth and seventh places. The confidence we had lost in the previous ninety seconds was coming back, runners clearly struggling from the fast-early pace. We made up huge chunks of ground on the field, passing them in ones and twos with little resistance. The race was suddenly thrilling, my competitive juices kicking in.

Just two laps remaining, and we were in fourth and fifth, only five meters off Page as we entered the corner.

Time to move. I pulled beside Dent as we entered the backstretch. At that very moment, Page slid out to lane two and exploded by Hickman and Snyder like he was racing a grade school child. Before he hit the corner, Page was gone. *Son of a bitch*. I was stunned how quickly it happened. Instinctively, I chased after the two Conant runners, passing Dent without thought, my eyes locked on the pair as I entered the penultimate homestretch.

Pulling onto the tail of the Cougar duo with a lap to go I eased back on the corner, hoping to gather some energy to unleash a kick on the backstretch. Hickman and Snyder must have been thinking the same thing. I chased them down the backstretch, unable to overtake either of the two as we rounded the last corner, holding off a furious effort from behind the final ten meters.

Fourth place. Not too shabby. I slowed to a stop and put my hands on my knees, looking over my shoulder as Dent stopped alongside. My mouth was as dry as an empty box.

"I got sixth...but I have no idea...what my time was," he said between breaths. "I was running...as hard as I could...but it felt more like...they were dying...more than it was me going so fast."

"It was so cool...to close on those guys...the last three laps." I took a deep breath. "I'm glad we stuck with Coach's plan."

"What do you think Page ran?" Dent pulled his singlet over his head as we grabbed our t-shirts.

"I bet it was under 4:15."

Coach Kozak came up to us with a smile on his face. "Nice job fellas! Jim, you ran an unofficial 4:22.8, Brett a 4:23.4. Both of you broke the school record!"

"No way. Are you kidding?" He was serious.

I clapped my hands together. "I knew it was good, but it was only in the last 600 meters I felt fast. We closed on the field just like you said." I grinned again. "Man, Coach, I'll never doubt you again!"

Coach Kozak beamed. "I knew these runners weren't very experienced this early in the season and would go out at a foolish early pace. The leaders went by the 800 at 2:06. For Page, that wasn't a problem, and maybe the two from Conant, but the rest of the field had no business running so fast. And they paid the price for doing it."

Daniel Page came up to us with his hand extended. "You were the two guys I was worried about. I knew about the pair from Conant, but I heard through the grapevine that you were in decent shape. I couldn't figure out what you were doing so far behind. When I made my move with two laps to go I snuck a peek, and sure enough I could see you had moved up to the front."

I beamed at the praise. "Honestly, I'm probably the most surprised runner here. I was just hoping to break 4:25, Coach Kozak said I ran 4:22 and Brett 4:23. What did you run?"

"Mr. Newton said 4:13.8."

"Whoa. Great job!" I looked at Dent and shook my head.

Page turned to get some water. "Later."

Chapter 6

December 22, 1967

Last September, Don dropped out of the Engineering program at Iowa and was classified 1-A by Uncle Sam, immediately available for military service. He was back from Basic Training for ten days and then off to Vietnam.

We waited at the Cedar Rapids airport. I stared out the window as the plane landed and watched him walk down the stairway from the DC-3 and across the tarmac. He looked strange in a uniform, especially because of the ten extra pounds he gained, and the hair buzzed on the sides.

Despite the frigid blast of air, Mom rushed towards him as he crossed the threshold, grabbing him in her arms to plant a kiss on his cheek. I could tell he was embarrassed by the attention. Dad reached across and shook his hand. Margie gave him a big hug. I didn't know what to do. It was too awkward to give him a hug and too formal to shake his hand. I just smiled and said hi. He smiled back.

"Now there's something you don't see every day, Chauncey." I grinned.

"What's that Edgar?" It was great to see him.

"A squirrel doing the backstroke."

We sat beside each other in the back seat of the station wagon talking about the food he wanted to eat and the books he was going to read. He didn't talk about his boot camp experience in Louisiana, something I came to learn he would rather forget, but he did have

lots of questions about my running. He was proud of the success I wrote of in my letters, even though it wasn't much.

I whispered Chick's line after we finished eighth at State and he laughed, telling me a few of his own from the seasons Chick coached him. We played basketball at the Rec Center, ping pong in the basement, and he even tried to teach me how to use a slide rule one morning when I saw him pull it out of his dresser.

"How much are you running?"

"I'm trying to be consistent at six miles per day. But some days it's tough. Chick want us to meet up after school to run, but a lot of the guys have jobs. Dave Eastman organizes the Sunday runs. If I can stay healthy, I think I can do even better than I did in cross country."

"We had to run a timed mile in army boots for Basic. You'll never guess how fast one of the guys ran." I shook my head. "4:29!"

"Whoa, I ran 4:39 in December at the University of Chicago Meet. I thought that was pretty good. Your guy would have kicked my butt."

"Your time is still good." I could tell he was proud of me. "Sub-4:40 is nothing to sneeze at. You might be able to get a track scholarship if you work hard. It would be cool to see you run college. Maybe even run for Coach Cretzmeyer. Just be sure to get a degree. You don't want to end up like me."

His words came out without a thought, a haunted look on his face as he glanced at me. The expression disappeared and his face went blank as he grabbed the army jacket off the hook and went out the back door. I had never felt such anguish in my life. After that conversation it was like he was already gone. He couldn't fight the reality any longer.

I had been working as a busboy at Howard Johnson's over Christmas break. If I wanted to have money for running shoes or clothes that made me less of a dork, this was my only option.

I ran the three miles to work those days. I carried my work clothes, a can of Right Guard, and a PBJ sandwich stuffed inside the gym bag strapped around my shoulders. The load bounced up and down

like a jackhammer. It reminded me of the training Don described in boot camp – twenty-five-pound backpacks and a drill sergeant that enjoyed making each day miserable. Most days I jogged the three miles home tired and cold, longing for a car.



January 6, 1968

I'll never forget watching him walk across the tarmac towards the airplane, a gym bag in his right hand, eyes focused on the ground. Don was bound for Vietnam. He didn't look back or even give us a final wave. He didn't want anyone to hug him. We stood at the window until the plane took off, all of us waving even though it was pointless.

The moment the plane was gone from sight, Mom sat down in the chair and cried. Margie and I sat side-by-side staring at the carpet. Dad consoled her in a muffled voice with an arm wrapped around her. It was a silent ride back home. I wanted to hug Don, but it was too late.

Temperatures were frigid the next day, falling into the teens overnight. It seemed somehow appropriate, as though it was punishment for my good fortune.

I was out the door early that morning, holding up my effort as a tribute to him. It was difficult to get out the door on a day when simply starting a car was a challenge. Mom was concerned I would burn my lungs from the frigid air, that it would be a health issue down the road. But to be honest, I was more worried about freezing my nuts.

I had never run outside in the worst of the winter, so when Dad suggested I put a sock in my jock I burst into laughter. I smirked at his joke as I stepped out the back door. That windy eleven-degree

day made me convert. He learned the lesson as a fireman. I learned it as a runner.

Rows of clothing hung from the basement clothesline was testament to my daily dedication. Despite the layers of t-shirts and insulated underwear I wore underneath the Little Hawk cotton sweatshirt, it was the Christmas windbreaker which proved to be the most useful present. The nylon material blocked winds that always found a path through my clothing and chilled me to the bone in the latter stages of every run. Exposed hair peeking from edges of my stocking hat froze into thin tentacles like icicles under the eaves, the insufficient protection of mittens evident by the fisted hands inside the knitted wool.

But I thought of Don and the miles got done.



I grew resolute in my decision to break with Patty after pondering the options for two weeks, yet still nervous that my choice was foolish. It hung over me like a dark cloud on every run before Christmas, the certainty of an unworkable relationship growing as the end of vacation neared.

We met in the empty school theater before lunch the first day classes resumed. I couldn't think of a clever way to present my thoughts or a considerate way to let her down, the words tumbling from my mouth like a ball rolling down the steps.

"It's over. I'm breaking up with you. Running is more important to me."

I was afraid if I paused or took a breath, she would convince me to change my mind, just as she had that Saturday last December. Yet it was all my fault. Patty hadn't failed. I had. I had failed to let her know how much running meant, how it wasn't fair to make me choose between her and running, but the gentle words to lessen the blow somehow escaped me.

For the first time in my life, I had discovered something I was good at. Something I excelled in. There were only five cross country

runners in the school faster than me and maybe nine or ten others in our conference. I finished forty-seventh at the State Meet after ten weeks of training, the top sophomore cross country runner in the state. Though I wasn't a child prodigy who could navigate college calculus by the age of seven or so musically inclined I could perform a sonata by Beethoven at six, I had shown phenomenal prowess as a runner. I was outstanding at something for the first time in my life.

It had been wonderful to date Patty. She made me feel I wasn't such a loser. To remove a social stigma, I found so hard to shake. I was a skinny misfit with acne and bad grades, a dork with no talent and personality so bland that no girl could find it interesting.

Dylan's lyrics came to mind: "I gave her my heart, but she wanted my soul." The truth was, I had wanted to give my heart, but my soul was already committed to running. It had taken me years to find something I was good at and I wasn't willing to give it up for a girl.

Her eyes went big and she burst into tears, hands covering her face in disbelief. I hadn't thought to tell her when Sally was around to help ease the pain, unversed in such protocol.

Walking away, I felt like the biggest shithead in the world as my eyes filled with tears. I heard her mumbling something incoherent with each sob. I wanted to turn around and put my arms around her for comfort, to hug her, to convince her I wasn't an asshole. But I was. I had flunked yet another challenge. This failure was as painful for me as watching Don board the plane to Vietnam.

As I walked back down the hallway with eyes glued to the ground, Kevin's voice brought me out of the funk, his enthusiasm catching my attention as I passed him in the hall.

He grabbed my wrist. "Jim, Jim. I gotta tell you about last Friday."

He excitedly described the fun he'd had at the last church activity. Father Tierney pulled him aside and gave Kevin individual instruction on the basketball court, planning a birthday party for him on the twenty-eighth.

It was hard to feel any emotion or enthusiasm for his story after what I'd just been through, but I managed to say how fun it sounded, and I had to get to my fifth period class.



January passed into February. The team ran together when possible, yet despite the good intentions of all it was an impossible task. Money issues, extra-curricular activities, and family considerations took precedence over this off-season time. There were jobs and band practices, AV Club and newspaper meetings, Latin Club and the yearbook staff. Always something. Rarely did more than three show up on a weekday and it was not unusual to have no one. We all dealt with the realities, but it was tough to stay on task.

The first week in February I sat on the couch beside Dad as Walter Cronkite first reported on the Tet Offensive, the largest North Vietnamese operation against unprepared South Vietnamese and US forces. I wondered if Don had any involvement in this event. In his letters there was much he couldn't speak of.

The initial optimistic responses from U.S. leaders proved to be bombastic, American soldiers overwhelmed by the size and scope of the Viet Cong attacks. A Stars and Stripes photo on CBS news captured the failed response of U.S. troops, a half-dozen dazed Marines piled atop a tank, one soldier bare from the waist up lying on an improvised stretcher, others wrapped in bloodied gauze over leg and facial wounds. The photo shocked America's beliefs of military invincibility.

I put in thirty-five to forty miles a week in February. Sundays the only day we were consistently together, our workouts dictated by that day's mood and the direction of the seniors.

Chick never checked up on us and the only training instruction we got was, "Just run as many days as you can."

When March rolled around and we officially began practice, I could tell I was in good shape, ready to run fast. Much faster than last September. The season couldn't start soon enough.



Our initial outdoor meet was at Kingston Stadium the first Thursday in April. A typical Midwestern spring day, with overcast skies and winds out of the northwest, the temperatures always twenty degrees too cold. Remnants of snow sat in gray clumps clustered in piles at the edge of the parking lot. It reminded us that spring and warm weather was still a rumor.

I sailed through the two-mile in just over 10:00, breaking the sophomore record by twenty-two seconds, easily defeating the trio of Kennedy runners. It felt so good to race again. The bus ride back to school was joyous and noisy. I smiled to myself as I thought about the race. It was going to be a good season.

I walked home from school with a quiet Kevin McBryant, talking about my race the whole way back, trying to bring him out of his funk. Over the past weeks and months, he had become more distant when our paths crossed, the goofy demeanor he was renowned for now cloaked in a disposition I didn't recognize. I was afraid I had somehow hurt his feelings but couldn't think what it might have been.

"See you."

Not hearing a reply, I slipped sideways through the opening in the fence. I burst in the back door and tossed my books on the table, thrilled to tell everyone know how well my race went.

They were all huddled around the TV, staring at the console. No one acknowledged me, their eyes glued to the black and white screen. Mom looked up and pursed her lips. I froze for a second, afraid to hear the next words out of her mouth.

"Martin Luther King Jr. is dead."

He had been shot on the balcony of his hotel in Memphis by an unknown gunman. It would lead to riots in Chicago, Detroit, and Los

Angeles. Businesses looted, buildings burnt to the ground, streets littered with bricks. Chaos spread throughout the country like a virus. That evening I sat on the floor in the TV room and leaned against one arm of the couch, my victory no longer so important. It was sobering to think there was so much hate in this world you could be killed just for the color of your skin.



Kevin McBride sat alone on the bus with his head down after the meet at Muscatine. I slid in beside him. His race was a disaster. He'd ran the sophomore mile like it had been through quicksand. The look on his face said the shit truck must have backed up at his door. I talked about my two-mile race and asked him about his mile. All I heard was, "It wasn't very good."

I changed the subject and asked him if he had any more church retreats, but he only shook his head. His disquiet made me want to put an arm around his shoulders, but it was too awkward. I sat there quietly, hoping my presence would somehow help.

There wasn't another word out of him for the next forty minutes. Or even when we walked home together. His silence bugged me.



Two weeks later, I faced my first stiff competition of the year in the two-mile at the Columbus Invitational in Waterloo. I was thrilled to be included with the varsity, the only sophomore from East High competing in the big invitational. Five of the top ten finishers at last fall's state cross country meet would be racing at the premier event of the evening.

The thought of running under the lights of the Columbus stadium was exciting, reminding me of the setting for a football game. Talk had it that tonight it would take under 9:20 to win in a rematch of last

year's cross country championships, where Eastman edged Krantz for second place.

All week long I had been on edge and a bit more irritable than normal. My patience was worn thin from all the miles over the past two weeks and the hard efforts on the track. I left Iowa City lethargic, feeling like I'd just done a fifteen-mile run. The last three nights I had slept poorly, and in general I was in a terrible mood, despite Chick's claim my workouts showed I was ready to run a 9:45.

Dave and I went out for our usual mile warmup, orange and pink tinged clouds drifting above as we jogged on the tree lined streets. We were both quiet. As we stretched on the asphalt by the flagpole, I couldn't shake my feeling of dread, but was too uptight to say anything. Even strides in my spikes didn't seem to loosen me up, but I figured I would be fine once the gun fired.

I jogged to the line with Dave, the enormity of my task tearing at my stomach like a meat grinder. Fourteen of us lined up on the six-lane track in two rows of seven. Even though the evening was cool, each one of the two-milers were cloaked in sweat as they toed the chalk line.

I was still in a daze after the gun fired, my reaction half a step behind the others. I got elbowed in the ribs by the runners on either side as the thirteen sped away from the line, leaving me two steps behind the field. Desperate to reconnect I sprinted back into the group, but the effort left me feeling like I was running with one lung. The first lap was seventy-one, but I was already exhausted, falling further and further from the pack with each ensuing lap, desperate for the torture to end.

Coming down the last straight the crowd gave me the pity applause, pretending there was something noble about finishing such a shitty race. I stared straight ahead into the void outside the stadium lights refusing to acknowledge their support. It only made me angrier.

Fuck them. Fuck running. Fuck it all.

My spikes scraped the cement as I continued through the gate towards the flagpole. I pulled the Avantis off and slammed them to the ground, slipping into the training flats as tears rolled off my cheeks.

I ran past Chick as he approached, hoping he didn't notice the tears. *Dammit!* I yanked the race number off my chest in one violent motion and crushed it in my hand, tossing the wad into a bush.

I slowed and bent over with elbows on my knees, screaming at the top of my lungs. "Fuuuuuuck!"

I wiped away tears that wouldn't stop falling and ran into the night. The failure of today's effort and the hundred other failures haunted my thoughts as I raced across the school grounds into the darkness.

Frustration built in my chest like a volcano and I began to push the speed. I used my anger to spend what I hadn't been able to spend ten minutes ago. Despite the over-riding fatigue that racked my body, the speed increased block after block and built to a crescendo until the pain and fatigue were so overwhelming, I could no longer run.

I stopped and bent over, rested hands on my knees and sucked the air in and out of my lungs like a smithy's bellows. There were no more tears. I had no more anger. I stared at the sidewalk, devoid of emotion. Turning in the direction I came from, I tried to decide what to do next. I walked the block with hands interlocked over the top of my head, staring into the distance.

Should I quit? Should I tell Chick I couldn't face any more?

This was the most fucked-up moment of my life. I nodded to myself. Yep, I would tell him on the bus ride home. I was done with track. Wallowing in self-pity, I jogged back to the stadium, looking for a familiar landmark. I hoped I wasn't lost. I was so tired I had to walk again, even the jog too much.

The lights of the stadium aglow over the tops of the trees finally came into view. I must have been walked for ten minutes, the gloom ebbing as I convinced myself I would get through this.

But just as quickly the frustration built, and the dark clouds returned. My apprehension grew with each step towards the lights. *How was I going to face Chick? Or my teammates? I had cried like a baby in front of them like a fucking loser.*

I sat on the front steps of the school, far away from the noise of the crowd and the lights of the stadium to try to sort my thoughts. I was lost. Something had to change. I worked so hard and yet ran so shitty.

The two-mile turned out to be an exciting race but I never saw it. Dave nipped Krantz again, just as he had in cross country. The hometown favorite mistook cheers on the last straight as redemption for last fall's loss. In truth, the crowd was trying to warn him of an impending disaster: Dave's kick. Five yards out, Krantz raised his hands up above his head like a robbery victim. That was enough to give Dave the last little edge he needed.

I walked alone towards the bus after the mile relay and stared at the ground, wishing I was at home under the covers. Someone approached from behind and I felt an arm go around my shoulders. I looked up to see Dave. "I heard you had a terrible race."

I nodded. "Yeah, I didn't have it today. I'm sorry." It burst out before I could prevent it. "I'm going to quit track."

Dave stopped and faced me with a fierce look on his face. "That's bullshit! You are not quitting. You're too good a runner to quit." It was clear he meant it. "I'll kick your ass if you do." Dave paused, speaking softer. "I know it sucked today, but every dog has it's day. Don't worry about it. The sun will come up tomorrow morning. Life will look better. I promise."

He gave me a pat on the back as Fomby grabbed Dave's arm and dragged him to the bus to celebrate

I couldn't believe what he said. Was I really any good? Or was he just trying to be nice? It was wonderful to think someone cared, but I wasn't sure if I believed him.

The back of the bus where Dave and Jim were sitting was wild all the way home with stories of the races and gross jokes flying back and

forth. I sat up front just behind Chick where it was quiet, and I could wallow in my own gloom. It was the longest bus ride of my life.

I stared at the upholstery tacks on the back of the seat in front until I finally got the gumption to say something to Chick.

He beat me to the punch. "Jim, you weren't as bad as you thought." He gave me a sympathetic grin. "It wasn't good, but you're still one of the fastest sophomores we've had in a while, so just put it behind you." He paused. "I know you're not going to believe this, but I was foolish to push you so hard. It's my fault you ran so poorly today." He put his hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes. "Not yours. I challenged you too much when I should have taken it easier. That's what a good coach does. It's good to have a work ethic but both of us need to control it. To keep an eye on those little signs."

Chick forced a smile. "Don't worry. We'll get this solved."

"Thanks Chick."

I wasn't in the mood to talk more. I listened to the radio on the bus as the Cedar Rapids announcer talked about the capture of Martin Luther King's killer.



Chick gave me three days off and went easy on the runs in the following days. The remainder of the season he had me compete in the sophomore races where the pressure wasn't as daunting, and I could rediscover a modicum of success. I turned in decent times and closed out the season the MVC Champion in the sophomore two-mile, but there was little joy in the achievement; only the relief that I was done. Haunted by the last three weeks, I couldn't get it out of my mind another disaster was right around the corner.

On the ride home from the Mississippi Valley meet, I sat on the sophomore bus in a seat with Kevin, watching the dashed white lines in the headlights, wondering if I was cut out to be a runner. Neither of us said a word on the forty-minute ride.

We arrived back at school, filed off the bus, and we all went down to the locker room to drop off meet gear. I sat on the bench stared at my padlock, unable to find the gumption to stand.

I closed the locker and went to look for Kevin. Sticking my head in the gym, I saw him sitting in the bleachers on the far side, his form cloaked in semi-darkness. It was spooky as I approached. Something was wrong. I sensed that he had been crying.

He looked up at me and smiled. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you on the bus. That was a good race today. It was really cool to watch you win."

"Thanks." I plopped down beside him and sighed. "Honestly, it was more of a relief. I'm glad it's all over."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Kevin gently shook his head side-to-side, took a deep breath, and forced a smile.

"Can you do me a favor?" I nodded. "Can you tell Chick I left my meet gear in the laundry basket." He looked up at me. "Let him know I think he is a good coach and I really enjoyed him."

"Yeah, but you can tell him Monday. Let's go." I was getting weird vibes from Kevin.

"I'm going to stay and clean out my locker. My season is over. You have the Sectional meet. I don't." He sighed. "You can head home. I've got things I want to do."

I looked at Kevin closely. "You sure? I'll be glad to wait."

"No that's fine. I really appreciate your support." It was the saddest smile I had ever seen. "You've really been a good friend. Thanks."

"It's no big deal to wait."

"No, that's fine. You've got to be tired. Go on."

I walked home alone, spooked by his words. I kept thinking I should turn around and talk with him. Say something profound like Chick would have. But I didn't know what to say.



The janitor found him the next morning hanging from a jump rope tied around an overhead pipe.

Depression was a constant companion over the next week. I replayed our last words over and over in an endless reel. I felt so guilty. I should have done more. I should have said something. I let him down.

We had just finished reading *A Farewell to Arms* in English class. I recalled one of Hemmingway's quotes from the story, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong at the broken places."

It was hard to believe I would ever be stronger for this experience. Kevin certainly wasn't.

I was shocked when Kevin's mother hugged me at the wake. I was hesitant to walk over, concerned Mrs. McBride was going to scream at me. But instead, she embraced me for a long time and held on as though it was one last chance to hold her son. As soon as she released me, sobs wracked her body in a mournful wave.

I was so ashamed. I turned to find a place to be alone and cry about Kevin's death by myself. I stared at the carpet and watched my tears hit the floor. I berated myself for not helping him more. Dave Eastman sat down beside me and put his arm over my shoulders. He didn't say a word.

It was hard to find sanity in the chaos that followed me. Life did shitty things, even to good people. It had happened to me just as it did to Don and Kevin and even to Patty. How did people handle setbacks? How did they get through life when everything turned to shit? I didn't know who to talk with or what to say.

A poor season, the loss of a girlfriend, my brother's departure for Vietnam, and Kevin's suicide. Life sucked.

Chapter 7

April 2, 2000

We checked out Coach Bee's *Illinois Prep Top Times* list every Tuesday. We looked for our names to see how we stacked up against the rest of the State. Daniel Page was continually at the top of the 800, 1600, and 3200-meter, and with early season times all of us would have killed to run at the State Meet. He produced an unbelievable 4:12.56/9:01.3 double on April 21 at the Bud Mohns Invitational after taking two weekends off to focus on training.

The early April weather was lousy and made for a disappointing start to my first outdoor season. It wasn't until the third weekend that I produced anything noteworthy. The cold and wind were much tougher on a runner than I would have guessed. After the perfect conditions indoors, it was hard to deal with the adversity northern Illinois offered early in the spring.

It left me frustrated as I fell in the weekly rankings. I turned in a string of 1:59's on the 4x800 and a couple of 4:25's, but in meets with temperatures in the forties and fifties, along with wind and/or rain, my chances to run a fast time was put on hold.

Finally, on April 28, a combination of good weather and great competition allowed me to run a fast 1600-meter. The Prospect Invitational was on a Friday night and it was a chance to race under the lights against some of the premier runners in the state. I spent most of the early race in fifth place but finished well.

I caught two competitors on the last straight with a strong kick to finish third, my 4:19.8 a career best. The early pace had been

perfect—1:04 and 2:09—and I finally broke the mark my sights had been set on for the past four weeks.

As I cooled down alone on the streets of Mount Prospect with a smile on my face, I knew I wouldn't give up this sport for anything. I was hooked on track.



Two weeks later, York's presence at the Near West Suburban meet, and specifically, Daniel Page, almost put an end to my season. It made me question why I chose to be a runner.

Held on York's track, the competition was exceptional, whether it was the long jump, the 1600, the 300 hurdles, or the 4x400. Kehoe explained on the ride to the meet it was not unheard of for a runner to finish third at conference and yet still end up taking the title of State Champion. To come away with a victory from this competition earned tremendous respect but guaranteed nothing. It provided confidence, but injury, illness, or mental impotence could just as easily prove fatal.

Just last week Page turned in an 8:45.3 at the DuPage County Meet against little competition. On the Prospect relay where I had run the 4:19, he split 1:50.2 on a 4x800 that ran 7:34. It was hard to wrap my mind around his range and these times. No one had the audacity to think they could beat him. In fact, anyone in a race with him had to admit he was running for second. Only a fool was brazened enough to think different.

It was hard not to steal a glance at him as he was doing strides on the backstretch before the race. Clad in the green sweats of York, everyone knew who he was. Page wasn't one of those fluid runners who made it look like anyone could do it. He was more of a power type runner who ate up ground with each motion of those piston-like legs.

Today, I only had to face him once. Unfortunately, it was the 3200. A distance I dreaded. Page put out his hand to shake as we

approached the clerking table from opposite directions. Before I could say anything, he asked, "What pace are you planning to run?"

I was shocked he cared what I was going to do. For a second, I stumbled over my tongue, uncertain what to say. I didn't want to tell him my plan, but I couldn't think of a diplomatic way to avoid blurt-ing out my strategy. It would only make me look like an asshole.

"Coach Kozak wants me to run seventy-twos for the first half of the race and then see if I can run seventies for the last half. It's not too windy, so I think it's pretty realistic." I quickly added, "This is only the second 3200 I've ever run, and to be honest, I'm not very experienced."

"That's okay. Do you mind if I go with you?" He was so noncha-lant. "We can trade off every two laps if you want."

"Yeah...sure. That'd be cool."

I walked over to the high jump apron and left my sweats by the goal post. What had I just agreed to? All that came to mind was I must be an idiot and that I had oversold what I could produce. Now, I had no choice to do anything but what I promised.

I grimaced and shook my head. I did one last stride out before I returned to the starting line and nodded at Coach Kozak standing along the corner by concessions. A Downers North runner went to the front at the gun, even though his best coming into the race was 9:52. Did he realize he was leading the fastest 3200-meter runner in the nation? *What a fool.*

From along the fence Coach Kozak yelled, "Good!" after the initial lap. The aroma of hot dogs and popcorn filled the air behind him. At the 800 mark, the clock showed 2:23 and some change.

Coach Kozak yelled out, "Awesome!" as a runner floated past me entering the corner. I panicked for a second, but clearly heard Page say "I have the next two" as he took over. I stayed behind him, staring at the dark hair on the back of his neck as we went down the backstretch, content to let him do the pace work on the next two laps. He was good for his word, passing the halfway point at 4:48.

Though it hadn't been explicitly stated I felt it was my responsibility to take the lead again. I surged to his side and managed to spit out "Next two."

I pulled around him and into the lead. He eased up as I passed and let me slide to the rail. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. These seventies were going to be a bitch. Despite the strength in my stride, the effort was beginning to hurt. Page hung behind me as we went down the backstretch and into the last 1,000 meters. I passed the sixth lap at 7:09, my exhaustion so great the split meant nothing. The timer might have well shouted "Mayonnaise." The left side of my brain was shutting down.

Page moved up on my shoulder as we leaned into the turn. My instincts took over and I surged to hold him off, instantly realizing my mistake. The effort nearly sapped a drained battery. I wouldn't finish the race if I made such a foolish move again.

On the backstretch, Page took off like only a State Champion could, going from a seventy-second pace to a sixty-two-second pace in eight strides, his acceleration astounding. The ease of his effort broke my resolve, the distance between us increasing steadily, my mind unable to process what I had seen. By the time I got to the 600-meter mark, he had a forty-meter lead that grew with every step. I was so discouraged it took all I muster just to stay on the track.

Everything seemed so pointless. Like I was trying to run a 4:30-mile in water up to my waist. I remembered nothing of the last lap. There was no pain. I didn't know how fast I was running or what place I was in. Only an overwhelming emptiness, a sadness so profound it crushed my soul.

I circled the track, helplessly hoping this torture would end. I slowed near the finish, crossing the line as dejected as a beaten dog. I bent over with elbows on my knees, staring down at the track.

Fuck me. That's it. I fucking quit. I'm done with running.

I felt a hand on my back but didn't bother to look up. "Thanks man. That was awesome." Page said.

I could hear other runners coming in but didn't bother to move and continued to stare at the track. I really didn't give a shit if they thought I was an asshole. I finally stood but didn't know where to go. I couldn't face anyone. Not Coach Kozak. Not my teammates. I embarrassed myself and I was ashamed that I believed I had the strength and stamina to beat Page. Yeah. Right. What a fucking fool. He played me like a sap.

Some extended a hand to shake but I turned and ignored them. I wasn't in the mood for some boring platitude. I bent over again and took off my spikes, slamming them to the ground with all my might, a guttural sound erupting from my throat. *Fuck me. Fuck everyone.*

Teammates that approached turned and walked away when they saw my expression. I shuffled down the center of the football field, oblivious to entreaties from officials about being in this area. I sat in a heap by the far goalpost and shaded eyes with my hands, watching the tears land on my ankles.

There was no putting it off any longer. I stood and walked down to Coach Kozak on the fence. My head hung like a hat on a hook. I was too embarrassed to meet his eyes.

"Don't tell me my time. I don't want to know." I had a sharp edge to my voice.

"But Jim, you broke 9:30!" I just stared at his shoes. "You ran a 4:48 the first half and 4:40 the second," Coach Kozak said, surprised.

"Coach, that sucked." For a second, I was embarrassed by my crass words, but it went away quickly.

"Well...get in a cooldown." He was afraid to say more.

I turned around and headed back over to get my sweats. I crossed St. Charles Road and walked into the darkness on the streets north of the school.

It was hard to reconcile how I felt with what I had accomplished. The time was a twenty-two second improvement, but the ease with which Page went by broke my spirit and crushed my soul.

It reminded me of an art project I made in third grade. I had been selected as the best in our class by Mrs. McDermont. Proud

as a peacock, a smile filled my face. I was so absorbed in myself I didn't notice the foot extended across the aisle as I walked to the front. My project broke into a million pieces as I stumbled face-first to the ground. I never forgotten the feeling. Humiliated. Mortified.

The race haunted me for days.



I didn't run Sunday and only made a half-hearted stab at Monday's workout. Coach Kozak was so concerned he had me do light running on Tuesday.

Mom could tell something wrong, but nothing she said could bring me out of the funk. She liked to discuss problems, Julie and her discussing everything under the sun, but unlike my sister, I wasn't a talker. It was easier with Marie.

She had been gone for her grandfather's funeral. She had flown out to California on Friday afternoon, so I had no one to listen to my problems. Now she was back.

I called her before dinner on Monday. "Let's meet at the library tonight," I begged. "I need to talk."

Marie got there promptly at seven-thirty, but I had been there for fifteen minutes. I desperately searched each face when someone came up the stairs.

She spotted me immediately. "Why so glum?" Marie smiled as she approached. "You look like someone stole your ice cream cone!" She plopped into the chair next to me at the table.

"I didn't want to bother you while you were at the funeral. It didn't seem right."

"Yeah, it was sad. I can remember sitting on my grandfather's lap as he drove the tractor through the orchards when I was young. But he was ninety-one. I knew he wasn't going to live forever."

I listened half-heartedly, impatient to get to my problem. Marie knew me well enough to cut her response short. She turned and gave me her full attention.

"I don't know if you heard about the Conference Meet," I said. Marie nodded. "I realize I should be happy with my time on Saturday, but somehow it feels so meaningless. So embarrassing." Tears appeared in my eyes and I rubbed them away with a thumb and index finger. "I don't know how to describe it. It's as though Page broke me. Like an untamed horse. I felt like everyone was laughing at my foolish attempt to beat him."

"No one was laughing." Marie was serious. Almost angry, I was so dismissive of my performance. "In fact, I talked with Kehoe today. He told me how impressed he was you stood up to Page. Like David standing up to Goliath."

"Yeah, well, I didn't win this one." I grimaced and stared at the floor. I had to wipe tears away again. "I convinced myself that he had respect for me. That he felt I had something special, I don't know... that the other guys didn't have. I guess I was too fucking cocky, and he wanted to knock me down a notch. Whatever. I'm such a fucking idiot. I'm thinking of quitting track."

"No way." Marie was shocked to hear me say this. "Baloney. No one else had the courage to challenge him. You did. And I'm proud of you!"

She leaned over and gave me a long hug. I didn't want her to let go. We talked for half an hour before I was ready to study. I felt a little better, but I had another fitful night of sleep and woke up feeling like a zombie.

The three days off and an easy run on Wednesday seemed to recharge my batteries. My week's training had been pathetic, but Coach recognized I was walking a razor's edge. He didn't want to press his luck.

I couldn't shake the apathy hanging over me. It robbed me of any emotion. The race was driving me crazy, like an itch I couldn't scratch. What crappy timing. I had the biggest race of my career on Friday afternoon at Glenbard West—the Sectional Meet—and I wasn't mentally ready to race.

My only race on Friday night was the 1600 meters, but I would be running against three of the top ten runners in the state. I fretted the last two days.

I was in great shape, ready to run the fastest time of the season, yet the fact was meaningless. Even though I'd put in all the miles, hit all the splits in practice, gotten all the sleep and pumped all the iron, there was no guarantee or assurance it would produce a good outcome. The conference meet buried my confidence like a 10,000-year-old relic. I didn't know if it would ever be resurrected.



I warmed up on the tree lined streets of Glen Ellyn skirting past million-dollar houses. It felt comfortable as I jogged by mothers pushing strollers, kids weaving back and forth on bikes, young teens riding skateboards on side streets. Out here, things were quiet and peaceful, my troubles non-existent.

I savored the sweat that built on my forehead and the lightness of my feet on the pavement as I navigated the shadowy sidewalks. A bit of the confidence I had lost last week crept back into my thoughts. Two blocks from the track, the announcer's calls drifted back into range, turning my delusions to the moment at hand. Doubt returned. In minutes, I would be thrown into the Colosseum like a slave against gladiators.

We waited for the starter to reload the gun as we stood behind the waterfall line. Jones and Henman from Naperville Central stood side-by-side in their white and red uniforms, the pair jumping in the air like shocked frogs. Gladstone from West, clad in the green and gold, stood calmly at the line, as casual as a mother holding her third child. These were the three I needed to beat.

Lost in my own world, I stared at two kids just outside the track that rolled down the hill like logs.

"Runners set." Instinctively, I leaned forward.

Nothing registered after that. The first two laps, my eyes were locked in on the runner in front, and as though a spell was cast, my mind completely blank. I couldn't tell you who it was or what place I was in. I didn't even recognize Coach Kozak's voice as he yelled out the splits, his shouts trailing off like mumbles from a moving train.

If it hadn't been for Marie's earnest plea on the backstretch, I probably would have crossed the finish line in the same position. Her voice snapped me from the stupor. I glanced over at her face, suddenly awakening from the trance. My eyebrows went up as focus went to the competition racing down the backstretch.

Son of a bitch. I realized the enormity of my predicament. I was in fifth place, forty meters behind the lead trio with less than two laps remaining. Two minutes to change the outcome of a certain disaster. Two minutes to start racing or I'd be sitting in the stands at State.

I reacted as though struck by lightning. I rushed into fourth place and took off in frantic pursuit of the trio up ahead. If I had time to assess the situation, I probably would have realized it was hopeless, but there was no time to think.

Ahead were three of the best milers in the state—Jones, Gladstone, and Henman. Catching them was the biggest challenge of my short career. Despite going all-out, I barely closed on the trio as I entered the penultimate homestretch. Maybe a little ground, but the amount of real estate I had to make up was daunting.

I heard the crack of the starter's pistol as I neared the finish line. My prodigious efforts only cut the distance to thirty meters on the three. The energy it took to reduce the gap was starting to sap my resolve. Thoughts bounced back and forth in my brain like a runaway jackhammer: *Catch those three. You can do it. Who am I kidding? There's still time. This is insane. Stay focused. I'm way too far back.* No one idea stayed in my brain longer than a second.

The only thing clear to me was two from each sectional were guaranteed a spot at States. A third or fourth might not be fast enough to hit the qualifying time. I was playing with fire. I had to catch two of them.

Coming out of the corner with 300 meters to go, Henman began to struggle and dropping five meters behind the pair. That was the sign I needed. In that moment, I knew I could get one. The other two? It was hard to tell.

I put all my attention on Henman, working to catch him as quickly as possible. It took me the entire backstretch to reduce the gap until it was less than three meters as I sprinted into the corner. The moment I realized Henman was mine, my focus went to Jones and Gladstone. I pulled back into lane one with 150 meters remaining. I was still fifteen meters behind the pair and running out of real estate.

They continued to fight hard as they entered the final straight, locked in a desperate battle to beat the other to the line. My brain didn't register the pain I should have felt, instinctively pumping arms as hard as I could in pursuit. I got within fifteen feet of the two, but it was too late.

I crossed the line two steps behind, certain my season was over. I leaned against the timing stand with my forehead on the back of my hands. Shit. I blew it. All that work and I blew it. A cup of water was sitting in the grass. I kicked it in frustration. I mumbled something to the pair and turned towards the backstretch, spotting Marie along the fence.

She gave me a timid wave, uncertain what I wanted. As I got close, I put my arms out in front and reached over the fence, desperate for a hug. Tears streamed down my face. My body shook with each sob.

I didn't know if what I had ran today was going to be enough to get to State, but if I made it, she was the reason. She had been the catalyst that turned the race around. If Marie hadn't called out, there's no question it would have been too late.

I held on to her for a long time as tears continued to roll down my face. Her arms around me and the scented smell of her hair was the salve to soothe my wounded ego. I released her hug, kissed the top of her head and wiped my face as I walked over to Coach Kozak, eyes locked on the grass.

As I got closer, I looked up and tried to tell from his face what he was thinking. He didn't say a word as I approached. I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear what he was thinking. I'd never heard him yell at an athlete, but I guessed I was going to be the first.

He finally looked up from the paper. I still couldn't read his face.

"That was the strangest race I've ever seen." He paused and shook his head. There was no tell-tale smile or disgusted grimace. Nothing. "Well, I have good news, and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"

"Might as well get it over with." My heart dropped lower than my feet. "Tell me the bad."

"The bad is you got third place." He quickly added, "But the good is you qualified for State! Made it by half a second!"

I looked up to see if he was kidding. He wasn't. My response was only a sigh of relief. Like when you hear the dentist say he finally finished drilling. I shook my head from side-to-side with a hand across my mouth. I gave Coach Kozak a feeble smile and stared at the ground again.

"Thanks Coach," I sighed. "I'm sorry I've been such a pain in the ass."

Six months ago, I bought my first pair of running shoes, uncertain with what was ahead. Maybe I was a fool to try out for another sport, or my decision to step away from soccer was smart. Only days like this kept me going.

I turned away from Coach Kozak to change into my flats, amazed at today's outcome. I just qualified for the pinnacle event of the season. Hard to believe. Regardless of what I achieved next week, I proved to myself I had the talent to be a good runner.

Next morning at breakfast, I set my bowl of cereal next to Mom, kissed her on the top of the head, and sat down. She had folded the newspaper so it was inside-out reading a lengthy article called "Hole in the Ozone Layer Over Antarctica Increasing" on page twelve. I could tell she was engrossed. We had been studying this in science class and even read some papers Al Gore presented.

She smiled. "Congratulations are in order. I heard you're going to State. I'm proud of you. Not many could have accomplished what you did. You know. Getting to State in your first year."

I was embarrassed. "Thanks, but if you had seen the race...well, it wasn't pretty." I shook my head.

"Yeah, I heard about it from Coach Kozak. He called me last night." She looked me in the eye. "The bottom line is you made it. Don't beat yourself up. You have a chance to redeem yourself next weekend. Focus on the positive."



If you have never been to the State Meet in Charleston before, it's hard to appreciate the aura of the royal blue O'Brien Field track. NCAA Champions and Olympians ran here. Rick Wohlhuter, Jim Spivey, Mike Durkin, and Craig Virgin were Illinois high school kids who got their starts at this same meet that provided glimpses of the huge feats they would accomplish in the years to come. This was the Illinois "Field of Dreams" where hours of work, and years of planning, came to fruition. No one entered the stadium without feeling the electricity created from all the nervous energy and testosterone. It was the Mecca of track in the state.

Brett Dent and I sat in the stands Friday beside Zach Kehoe, who under an umbrella to avoid the sun. The three of us watched Scott Walls compete in the prelims of the high jump.

"What do you think it will take to make the final?"

"Last year it was 4:19.6," Zach said. "But I bet if you don't break 4:19, you won't make it."

"I'm kind of nervous because I have zero experience at this level. I know it's one thing to have three or four good runners in a race, but tomorrow, everyone in the field is a good runner. There is no room for mistakes."

Scott was getting ready for his final try at 6'4". He missed badly.

"He's out." Zach closed the umbrella, then stood up and stretched. "Let's go to the t-shirt tent."



"Remember our plan!" Coach Kozak shouted before I entered the clerking tent. "Good luck."

With those words, the announcer called us to the clerking tent. "Class AA 1600-meter report."

It was strange to sit next to an opponent who was every bit as nervous. As I took a seat, I wondered if I even belonged in this group. Gladstone had beaten me at Sectionals, Santini of Lockport ran 4:18 at his conference meet, Grady of Sandburg snuck under 4:20 twice, and the down-state guy from O'Fallon, who was as skinny as a rail, had run a 4:19.

"Heat Two, line up." The clerk stood at the opening. "We'll be heading out to the edge of the track when the first heat passes the line."

As I got up, I heard a voice from over my shoulder. "Good luck Jim." I turned to see Daniel Page sitting as relaxed as Buddha.

"Same to you." As if he needed it.

We lined up fourteen wide, eye-to-eye with those who had just finished. Fatigue was etched on their faces as they stared up at the scoreboard. Only seven or eight minutes ago, they had all looked so focused and determined, and now...there were only two smiling faces.

"Runners set..."

Bang! We were off.

An elbow hit my left arm as the O'Fallon runner got out quickly. I stared at the sea of blue in front of me. The runners made rapid moves to the left at the orange cones while I maintained a gradual line into lane two towards the start of the two hundred. Rounding the far corner, we settled into a tight pack with the yellow and navy

of O'Fallon leading the way. I was about seventh or eighth on the outside of the swarm.

I could hear the announcer, calling out the field as we raced down the initial homestretch. "Sixty...sixty-one...sixty-two..." Damn, we were flying!

It was Crane of Stevenson, Gladstone of Glenbard West, Grady of Sandburg, and Santini of Lockport in the top four spots. I wasn't going to have to worry about the pace. We held our positions going down the backstretch—it was too early in the race to jockey for position. There was an impatient runner half a step behind on the rail that continually clipped my left heel. I wanted to turn around and tell him to chill, but I needed to focus on the runners in front.

Around the corner and into the homestretch, we ran together as though in a choreographed pack, no one willing to give an inch.

"2:06...2:07...2:08..."

Past the scoreboard and out of the corner, the first signs of fatigue were beginning to show on the runners in front. Time to move.

Just as I prepared to slide out and pass Grady, a foot clipped my left heel. I stumbled and lunged towards Grady, cartwheeling my arms to maintain balance, both of my hands landing on his back. In that split second, a flash of red flew by as adrenaline surged through my body.

Son of a bitch. I'm going to kick his ass.

Six hundred meters remained. I tore after the runner in red like a man possessed, promising myself to get that asshole. The lead group of three were twenty-five meters up on me. Crane and the man in red followed in their wake and flew down the homestretch and into the last lap. I had to close the gap soon or I would be in trouble. Sixth place was never going to make the finals.

I pictured Marie and remembered how she got me through the Sectional race. I hoped thoughts of her could help me again.

I sped around the corner and into the backstretch, all my effort on catching the runner in red. It was fifteen meters halfway down the back straight, then to ten with 200 meters remaining, but the effort I

spent to get there left me with little in reserve. The last furlong was like one of those war movies where a straggler makes a futile attempt to grab the hand of a soldier on a moving train. I was still two or three meters behind him when I crossed the line.

Sixth place. I'd blown it. There was no way sixth place would get me into the final. I took my hands off my knees and looked around, but the man in red was nowhere to be found. I pulled off my spikes and slammed the pair to the turf.

Son of a bitch!

Grady stared at the scoreboard with a water cup in his hand. I needed to apologize.

"Sorry about pushing you," I said sheepishly, "but whoever was in the red caught my heel and I tripped into you. It wasn't intentional. I was falling. I'm sorry."

"No problem." Grady pulled off his spikes. "It actually gave me a boost when I was feeling a little gassed."

Grady and I talked about our race while we watched heat three from the shade of the tent. Both of us noticed Page went right to the front and the pack settled in behind. After the first lap, the officials yelled and herded us off the track.

I walked through the check-in tent and past a throng of parents, coaches, and friends at the entrance, looking for Coach Kozak. He stared up at the scoreboard and wrote down results from the third heat. He waved me over.

"I just caught the results of Heat Three, and right now you are the thirteenth time...thanks to the slow pace by Page. So, I think you'll be okay."

"What do you mean?" I was puzzled. "I thought you said they only take twelve to the final."

Coach Kozak leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, "I ran over to the bullpen after your race and spoke with one of the corner officials. He said there was talk about DQ'ing the runner from Bradley-Bourbonnais, you know, for tripping you."

“Is that who that was? I never really saw him but could feel him throughout the race. He kept clipping my heels.”

Just then, we heard the PA announcer: “Would the coach from Bradley-Bourbonnais please report to the bullpen.”

Coach Kozak and I looked at each other. Was it what we were thinking? Maybe things were going to fall into place after all. Ten minutes later we studied the results board on the northwest side of the stadium:

AA 1600 Meter Prelims

Heat 1

4:17.93-Q 4:18.11-Q 4:19.51-Q 4:19.80-Q 4:20.65 4:21.10

Heat 2

4:16.40-Q 4:16.66-Q 4:17.61-Q 4:18.21-Q 4 :19.51 4 :20.02-Q

Heat 3

4:15.01-Q 4:16.50-Q 4:19.49-Q 4:20.13 4:20.88

Heat three had five guys who had broken 4:20, but Page’s tactic of pulling into the lead and then immediately slowing down the pace ensured I got into the final. When he turned in a fifty-eight second last lap, it became a fight for second, each of them afraid only one spot was left. They found out, just as I had two weeks earlier, that Page could control races and demoralized opponents merely by his presence.

For the second week in a row I got lucky.



I went over the plan for my final as I jogged over to the grassy area south of the baseball diamond. I ran under the shade of silver maples and lindens south of the outfield fence, the environment much more peaceful.

Jogging back and forth, I thought of the scene last November. Walking into Dick Pond and telling the store clerk I was a miler. I smiled at the audacity. As though my statement was fact. Yet history showed me to be right. No matter what happened today, soccer was secondary. I was now a runner.

Daniel Page winked at me as I sat down on one of the chairs in the clerking tent. "You owe me!"

"What are you talking about?"

He looked around and replied quietly. "If I hadn't led the third heat so slowly, you wouldn't have made it today."

I inadvertently grinned. "Thanks."

I sat with my head down and thought about the strategy Coach Kozak gave me. It was nice to have a plan and pretend I knew what I was doing, but when you are in the heat of the competition, sometimes it's better to just react.

Two years ago, a defender grabbed my shirt just as I jumped for a header. The resultant shot went off my shoulder and into the net. The trajectory was so weird the goalie missed the ball completely. It looked brilliant on the video, but there was no way I planned it.

Things occur in competition you can't anticipate. I understood his strategy, but there is always an unforeseen issue, a point where a decision had to be made and it had to be made instantly. There was no time to contemplate options. Only one tenth of a second, a blink of an eye to decide. Choose right and things fell into place. Choose wrong and your dream was gone.

I stood at my mark. "Runners set." The gun exploded and we were off. My first state meet, and my first final.

Page shot to the lead like he was running an open 800-meter and the rest of the field obediently followed. Whether this was the pace he was going to run for four laps, or he was just trying to get clear of the runners, no one knew. But we did know each of us had a decision to make, and it had to be made fast. Stay close on his tail and run an insane early tempo or hang back and save some for later.

I panicked like a squirrel crossing a busy street and rashly decided to finish what I started. Page led the field through the first 400 at 1:00, the last of the twelve at 1:03. I passed the first split at 1:01, shocked to find myself in fourth place, eight runners trailing me.

As we circled the corner and entered the backstretch the announcer called out the field: "Page of York, Kelley of West Chicago, and Santini of Lockport," their insane tempo producing a five-meter gap on our trailing group. By the time the threesome crossed the 200-meter start, they had widened it to fifteen meters.

Somehow, I was the one leading the rest around the north corner and into the halfway point. I watched the clock on the scoreboard as they went by at 2:02. *Whoa.*

Our group passed the half-way point at 2:05. It made me nervous. My precarious situation made the hair prickle on the back of my neck as I rounded the turn. It was the same sensation I'd experienced after a wrong turn into a bad neighborhood at a White Sox game.

I realized my wheels were going to fall off before I got to the finish. There was just too much real estate left and not enough gas in the tank. The truth of my predicament was as certain as the coming pain before a punch. I got suckered into leading and gambled too much too soon. The powerful stride I rode into eight hundred abandoned me on the penultimate homestretch, fatigue stealing my courage. Man, I was tired. How was I ever going to make it another lap?

The last 300 meters my race was in slow motion, as though wet blankets were tossed over me one by one, the load heavier with each step. My head tipped towards the track surface like a chastened child as I waited for the coming onslaught. Runner after runner flew by on the backstretch, my fierce efforts accompanied by a crushing fatigue. I refused to give in but got little in return for my courage, like bailing a canoe with a thimble. The physical effects of leading had been too much for such an inexperienced runner. Energy drained from my body as I circled the final corner. I glanced up briefly at the last straight, met with laughter from the running gods.

The final fifty meters were torture. Two steps past the line I stopped and bent over with hands on my knees. The pain pummeled my body in a way unlike that of a good race. I wanted to collapse on the track, but fought the urge, knowing I would look even more pathetic.

Someone approached. "Nice job." I couldn't meet his eyes and I only gave him a limp handshake.

I blew it. *Fuck!*

Runners stood in place and stared up at the scoreboard on the south end of the stadium, but I was too disappointed to care about my place or time. I didn't want to know. Finally, I couldn't resist and looked up.

4:18.93. Tenth. *Son of a bitch!*

I took off a shoe and slammed it to the track. The first loser spot. Nine got medals and I got tenth. Other than "Dead Fucking Last", ninth in track and twenty-sixth at the State Cross Country Meet were the most detested finishes. Three of us were escorted off the track, while the rest got to stay for the awards ceremony. I started to drink the cup of water, but instead slammed it at the ground as the anger built.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Welcome to the State Meet. I stormed out the gate and over to Coach Kozak who was waving at me in the shade by the discus rings. It was embarrassing to face him after the pathetic race.

"I'm sorry Coach. That was terrible." I wanted to toss my spikes again. "I'm so," It was hard not to use a pejorative. "disappointed. I knew with a lap to go I wasn't going to make it. I was toast." I shook my head. "That last lap sucked." I swore under my breath.

"Let's focus on the positive." He waited until I looked up. "You ran a career best. You were the only sophomore in the final. Last year you wouldn't have even known where the Illinois State Meet was held and now you make the finals. So, don't be so hard on yourself."

"I guess so, Coach." I grimaced. "But I didn't do all that work just to get my butt handed to me. Honestly, I thought I could be fourth or fifth. Tenth isn't what I had in mind."

“Well you have two options.” Coach smiled. “Quit or work harder. Which is it going to be?”

I just growled to myself. There would be no soccer this fall.

Chapter 8

June 6, 1968

Another assassination. Another promising future erased by a gunman. Bobby Kennedy was shot after a campaign rally in Los Angeles by a Jordanian emigrant. It was a crushing blow to a nation that had seen riots in Watts, Black Panther protests in Chicago, and the perpetual ugliness of segregation in the South. Each event followed the other like dominoes in a line, a country torn apart at its seams.

America was desperate for something to look forward to and offer a way to put all the tragedies behind. I also looked for answers to my personal problems—the death of a childhood friend and the breakup with a girlfriend.

Chick left the summer training up to us, just as he had over the winter. The task was as mysterious as dating. Although I had great respect for his motivational skills and tactical knowledge after last season, Chick had been the sophomore football coach for thirty-two years. He'd taken over cross country only three years earlier. It was clear much of the training he gave us during the season was created from the seat of his pants, borrowed from this coach or that magazine. He relied on the work ethic of athletes to establish an atmosphere which produced results.

Coming up with a solution to this lack of direction was like trying to figure out how to work a slide rule. There was nothing at the library simple enough for me to implement and even the training articles in *Track & Field News* didn't provide substance needed for a beginning runner.

I grabbed the Nagle Lumber calendar that hung at the workbench and sat at the kitchen table. I stared at the month of June like it was a calculus test with thirty problems. Fomby joked that putting together a training program was like the Castoria laxative commercial—“Are three prunes enough? Six too many?” I never knew what number to write in each square.

I settled on thirty-five miles for the first half of June and forty the second half. I filled in the squares of each week like I was completing a numerical crossword puzzle, using the eraser as often as the pencil and guessed my way through the month. It was like mixing the ingredients for a cake without the knowledge of how much of each to put in.

I finished filling in the squares and stared at the calendar, pleased with my creation. It was easy to get up at 7:00 a.m. and out the door because I was accustomed to 5:45 a.m. when I had the paper route. Seven o'clock was sleeping in.

It felt good to complete the miles before my full-time job at Howard Johnson's and the unpredictability of daily life. Each morning I circled the block to get to 7th Avenue and waved at Police Chief McCarney when he approached me on his walk to work.

He belted out, “Morning Jimmy!”

I smiled. Reflecting his greeting was the only positive thing I would hear on the run.

It was fun to watch the city awaken as I glided down Rochester Avenue past house after house—the slap of a screen door as an old man grabbed the newspaper off the porch, the Dane's Dairy driver in white uniform as he stepped off the truck with milk bottles, the steady whine of the hopper on the garbage truck as trash was lifted into the bed, a shout heard through screened windows, “Eddie, it's time to get up.” Robins searched for worms in the grass, squirrels chased each other up and down trees, rabbits hid under the overhang of bushes as I jogged through the neighborhoods.

Up Jefferson Street and across campus, I leaned over the rail and spit into the murky water as I crossed the river. Heading back up the

hill into the west side of town I circled the city, lost in my private world. I searched for the location of a cooing mourning dove while I discovered new streets one day at a time in my lonely pursuit of fame. Rarely did I see another runner, or even have a partner to train with.

Jim Fomby called one Wednesday night in mid-June and asked if I was interested in going to Des Moines for an AAU meet on Saturday at North High School. I was anxious for a change of pace.

“Sure, but how will we get there?” I was thrilled, but really didn’t want to hitchhike.

“I picked up a 1948 Pontiac my Grandpa had in his barn down in Winfield. It made it up here, so I think we can make the trip there.”

I didn’t know a ‘48 Pontiac from a ‘48 Special, but if he said it would get us there, I guess he knew what he was talking about. Ray Clancy, Roger Marquez, Matt O’Hara and I each chipped in a buck for gas and we were off to Des Moines.

The Pontiac had a working AM radio. Jim tuned it to the KIOA “Good Guys” all the way there cranked the volume full blast so we could hear the music over the wind that rushed through the windows. To be sixteen and have no parent lording over us was exhilarating. We sang mostly off-key, but always at the top of our lungs, excited about the adventure ahead. It was the first time I had laughed without restraint since Kevin’s death.

The loose cinders and dust that arose from running on the track left us looking like members of a chain gang—sweaty, dirty, and tired.

After the meet, Fomby gestured vaguely towards the north end of the track when we asked about the showers. At first, we didn’t see anything resembling a locker room, but Jim smiled and nodded at the metal storage structure. We just about died laughing when we saw the so-called, ‘locker room.’ It was a 15’x40’ storage shed located at the north end of the track just opposite the school. A corrugated aluminum building with a tin roof and exposed wooden studs on the inside, it was anything but luxurious.

We stuck our heads in but couldn't see a thing. There was no bulb in the overhead light. Fomby pushed the door wide open and allowed light in. He pointed out a shower head at the far end.

He turned to us and smiled. "Boys, welcome to Club Med."

I could barely see the hot and cold faucets that ran from the back of the bathroom wall on the far side. It looked like the shower in the basement of my grandparent's house built in 1921. There was no curtain and nothing to provide privacy.

I was the first one in. I climbed over starting blocks and hurdles, rakes and aluminum vaulting poles, high jump standards strewn randomly throughout the structure. It was an obstacle course just to get to the far end. Even with the door open, it was still dark. Probably just as well. I don't know that I wanted a clear picture.

Fomby showered last, belting out songs at the top of his lungs that you could hear halfway across the track. He had his own perverted version of the latest Turtles hit, "Happy Together".

After we got cleaned up, we drove over to the McDonald's by Drake University and then to Vic Young Athletics on University Avenue. It was like going to the enchanted Land of Oz. Every sports item you ever dreamt of was located somewhere on a shelf.

We walked up and down aisles that were stacked eight feet high were leather footballs, trays of spikes and cleats, canvas shoulder pads, rows of right and left-handed irons, Wilson tennis balls, relay batons, shin guards, basketballs, Bike jocks, Spalding baseballs in cardboard boxes, a wooden discus, ping pong balls, nylon running shorts, a Hawkeye baseball undershirt, Bauer hockey skates, and nylon Adidas soccer shorts. I could have walked the aisles for hours.

Every sporting goods store has a special aroma, just as a new car does. Canvas camp tents, rubber bicycle tires, chalky baseball resin bags, jars of pungent Cramergesic, rubber swim flippers, and the sweet smell of Coppertone sunscreen. A blind man would have enjoyed the visit.

But nothing could match the intoxicating aroma of a baseball glove. To hold a Rawlings mitt to my face and inhale the leather

scent...was nirvana. I hung around the area, trying on all the gloves as I pretended to field a ground ball while the others circled the store. We saved the best for last.

It was fun to wander around the store, but we were here for a purpose: to buy a pair of Adidas Gazelle training shoes. They were displayed on the back wall, hung like works of art, each shoe spotlighted in a glow like it was a church icon. Royal blue, fire engine red and gold, we stared at each pair, amazed to be looking at the real thing.

Once we absorbed the reality of our eyes, we reverently took a single shoe off the tray and turned them over in our hands. We examined the hexagonal tread on the bottom and the kangaroo skin leather on top. It was not an exaggeration to say we handled them like we were holding a Fabergé egg. To touch what we had only seen in the ads or pictures in *Track & Field News* was hard to fathom.

I liked the Tigers I had gotten last December at Dick Ponds, but these were special. They were the ones Jim Ryun wore. A world record holder in the 880 and mile, he was larger than life to a sixteen-year-old who wanted nothing more than to be cool.

Friday morning, I had ridden my bike to the First National Bank and took fifteen dollars out of my paper route savings. It had taken me almost five weeks to earn the money, but I had no qualms about spending it on such a worthy item. A man dying of thirst would pay \$12.98 for a cup of water and I would certainly do the same for a pair of Adidas.

I wore them out of the store and tossed my worn-out Tigers in the box. I wanted to believe that with these, a sub-4:30 mile was right around the corner, acting like a five-year-old showing off his new cowboy outfit.

We sang the Top 40 tunes all the way home and stopped in Grinnell for a burger and fries at the West Side Café. We fell asleep within minutes of leaving the diner, my blue Gazelle's stuck out the window from the back seat for the world to see. Before the summer

was over, I had to spring for another pair, but was more than happy to spend my savings on such a worthy item.



Though running was not a popular activity, I took to it like a duck to water. There was a purity in the pursuit, a certain joy from a simple bipedal activity which evolved from our ancestors thousands of year ago. Runners needed no ball, required no referee; the sport was free of a learned skill from an overbearing coach. It only required the traits of discipline and work ethic to achieve success.

I had friends who yearned to create music. Some invested their souls in Young Life or the church, and others simply wanted to grow their hair long and become hippies. But these held no interest. For me, it was running and only running.

As much as I detested winter running, the heat of summer training had its own special issues that challenged my resolve. It was great to run unfettered from layers of clothing, but I quickly tired of the oven-like July temperatures. Moisture beaded on my body like that on a glass of iced tea, sweat sliding down my arms and hamstrings like the light brush of a blue jay feather. My eyes were tender from rubbing salt-drenched lids and the jock-itch that led me to seriously consider running sans support, though my meager appendage would be swinging back and forth like a metronome. Finally, I had to stand in front of a fan for ten minutes after each run just to stop sweating, a cold shower the final remedy to cool off.

When I didn't have to work at Howard Johnson's, my Saturday route was the highlight of the week, unlike any of the others. I left home with two quarters, a nickel, and two pennies in a sandwich bag tucked into the waistband of my jock.

Up the long hill on College Street and over to Burlington, I crossed the river, hypnotized by the churning brown water below the dam. The roiling action tossed small branches and unknown detritus, the depths rumored to be a haven for catfish four feet long. Southward,

paralleling the river for a quarter of a mile, I could see the sign for my destination in the distance: Dairy Queen.

I stood in line at the outdoor window. Sweat slid down my temples and chest and I gave a wide berth from customers waiting their turn.

“A large chocolate shake,” I said as I dumped the change out of the bag, careful to avoid sweat on the counter.

The female cashier picked up the change like it was coming from the depths of an old couch. I sat on one of the wooden picnic tables that overlooked the river savoring the delight despite the vice-like brain freeze pulsing at my temples. Two minutes later I was back on the road, enjoying the last vestige of chocolate as I headed towards the City Park.

At \$1.15 an hour, I wasn't rolling in cash working at HoJo's, but I had no choice if I wanted spending money for shoes, clothes, or a social life. It was embarrassing when high school classmates smirked at me because of my loser job, the hideous HoJo hat doing nothing to raise my status.

Waitresses liked sharing a shift with me because I moved fast and their tables opened quickly, but Dick, the dishwasher, would have preferred I work slower. He glared each time I came through the kitchen door with another tub of dishes because it meant he had to put down the *Mad Magazine* and get to work. His laziness frustrated me, but as the manager's nephew, he got away with a lot.

On a busy Friday night after a tiring eight-mile run in the rain, it all came to a head. Moira Crooks was a gorgeous blond in the class ahead of me at East High. She liked to think she looked like Brigitte Bardot and I couldn't disagree. Smart and well-built with a button placed perfectly on her HoJo uniform, she knew how to bend over the table to flirt with the men. She got tips I would have died for. She was also clever enough to know if she wanted to maximize profits, she needed to turn over her tables fast.

That's where I came in. The same technique which worked on male customers worked on me. I bussed her tables just to get the smile and dreamed many nights of Moira before I dozed off.

The problem occurred one Friday night in early August when the place was packed with customers and dirty dishes were coming in with the consistency of a drumbeat. Tubs were stacked so high in the kitchen that I ran out of counter space to put them. I glared at Dick and put a tub next to his feet, daring him to match my speed.

"You asshole, get them off the floor!"

"Well, if you're too fucking lazy to wash faster, I'll throw them in the dumpster next time."

He gave me a "Just try it look" as if to challenge me to carry through on my bluff. I wasn't in the mood for his taunts. I knew it was wrong, but the combination of Moira's admonishments to clear the tables and the dishwasher's challenge made it easy to toss the first tub of dirty dishes in the dumpster.

Saturday afternoon, when I came in for work the manager caught me as he was coming out the kitchen door.

"Is it true what Dick said about the dishes?"

"Yes...but—"

He cut me off. "I don't care," he yelled. "There is no excuse for tossing dishes in the dumpster. You're fired."

I was stunned. The manager turned and walked to the back of the restaurant. I stood glued to the floor and stared at a fire extinguisher on the wall, noticing Dick's face in the oval glass of the swinging door, a big grin plastered on his puss. I gave him the finger and mouthed "fuck you" before I pulled the apron off and tossed it on the counter alongside the hideous hat.

I headed towards the front door to ride my bike back home. Moira appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me by the arm. I was afraid she was going to yell at me also.

"That asshole just cost me a lot of money. No one else buses tables as fast as you. I had things going so well and he messed it up. If Dick

didn't have connections..." Moira shook her head. "What an asshole!" She leaned forward and gave me a hug. "See you."

I stared at her hips as she walked away, wishing she would have hugged me longer. She didn't apologize for contributing to the loss of my job or thank me for the extra effort, but ultimately it was my fault.

Instead of finishing my summer job when school resumed, I was without an income for the last three weeks of August. But it also was a chance to get in more running and be in the best shape of my life and to see if I couldn't be a name at the State Meet. I needed the redemption after the lackluster finish to my sophomore season.

Chapter 9

June 3, 2000

Three months of summer lay ahead like a fifty-dollar bill in my wallet. So many choices and I was so pumped to get started. Since I wasn't playing club soccer, I didn't have anything interfering with my weekends.

Marie and I made the most of the newfound freedom. Great America, Wisconsin Dells, the Fourth of July fireworks in Naperville and the Ribfest. But first up was White Sox vs. Cleveland game on Saturday at 1:05 p.m., the first weekend in June. It was an easy ticket to get with the way the Sox started the season.

As we drove in Marie's car to the game, Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* played while we talked about the rest of the summer. I stared at the outline of the Sears Tower as we approached the city and wondered if I was making a mistake to run cross country this fall.

"Did you hear anything more about the job at the soccer camp?" Marie glanced at me as she drove.

"Yeah, the Fire's Director of Special Events called last week and said they would pay me \$250 a week to work six, five-day kid's camps that go from ten in the morning to three each day. It is a sweet deal, because I can stay involved in soccer, but don't have to worry about playing at Grange."

"That reminds me, I saw Coach Jones Wednesday when I stopped in at school to pick up my cello. He asked about you."

"What did you tell him?" I felt guilty.

“That you were thinking about going out for cross country.” Marie cringed, realizing the slip. “I hope I didn’t say anything I shouldn’t have.”

“No, that’s cool.” He deserved better. “I need to stop in and talk with him next week. It’s not fair to leave him hanging.”

“What do you have planned tomorrow?” Marie asked.

“I need to stop at Dick Pond and get a pair of shoes for summer training. Anything to stay away from injury. Then I thought we could drive into the city and see *Citizen Kane* at the Music Box theatre.”



Dad picked me up the next weekend for one of the scheduled visits and took me out for pizza in a lame attempt to connect. He congratulated me on a great track season and awkwardly apologized for missing my meets. He explained he was busy with work and had no chance to get away.

It was nice to hear his praise, but the excuses were the same ones he and Mom argued about before the divorce. I didn’t want to hear it. Even though he was my father, we hadn’t lived under the same roof for almost seven years. There was little attachment between us, my family memories mostly vague recollections of shouting matches at the kitchen table or behind closed doors.

Yet when he began talking about his running career over pizza at DiNico’s, we suddenly clicked. I discovered a side of him I never knew existed nor cared about when my sport was soccer.

Captivated by the tales of his running career, I devoured the pizza. Each of his vignettes was like an unearthed ten-dollar bill discovered inside an old book: the two All-American awards and the three Drake Relays titles almost twenty-five years ago. The casual descriptions hit me like a bolt of lightning and my opinion of him jumped a notch as the amazing stories unfolded from the booth of a pizza parlor.

Inspired by his stories I asked a question that wouldn't have crossed my mind an hour ago.

"I've talked with Coach Kozak about his summer program, but I want to get some insight from you."

Dad paused, his face taking on the earnestness of a preacher as he spoke. "Well, the first thing I want to tell you is, don't show off at the camp. Getting injured teaching an eight-year-old to play soccer is ridiculous. Do your job and stay injury-free."

He took a sip of water. "Second, cross country race strategy and track race strategy are two different animals. You did great on the track but there are no 400-meter splits to keep you on pace. In cross country no two courses are the same. Success is all about relying on your teammates. Your coach sounds like he knows what he is doing, so listen to him. He's the brains."

"Coach Kozak has us at forty-five miles per week in June, up to fifty-five in July, and maybe even seventy in August. Do you think that's enough?"

"You may have to double the first week, because you might not feel ready to jump right to forty-five or fifty, but on the whole, his plan is solid. Make sure you include some hill work each week and don't forget to get in strides, even some repeat 200's." I nodded at his every word.

I leaned over and gave him an awkward hug when he dropped me off at home. I turned to wave before I walked in the front door. It was the best experience I'd had with him in a long, long time.



Each morning I set the alarm on my computer so I could be at the school by six-thirty for the team practices. As with the winter training, it was easy to spring out of bed the first few days and ride my bike the two miles to school, but as the days rolled on and fatigue reared its ugly head, the alarm seemed to make being under the blankets much more attractive.

But by the end of the second week I settled into a steady daily routine. Up at six for practice, leave for soccer camp at nine-thirty, home at three-thirty, thirty-minute nap and three-four miles before supper.

Training alongside our top seniors, I could tell by the workouts I was running faster and getting stronger. I handled the tempo of Dent and Kehoe on the longer runs quite easily, something I couldn't do last spring. Their constant encouragement and the daily challenges made it happen. My learning curve was faster than most athletes because I had a strong endurance-based background, but I made a point to bust my ass each day. I wanted to prove to my teammates I was a hard worker regardless of any talent.

Bonds with teammates grew daily and I discovered a profound respect for the sport. These guys worked their asses off. There wasn't one cross country runner who dogged it on an interval or cut short Coach Kozak's mileage, no matter what their talent level. They inspired me daily and helped me recapture the "All for one, one for all" attitude I had lost with former soccer teammates.

The last Monday of June, Coach Kozak handed out race applications to our top nine after practice and explained about signing up for the Downers Grove Ten-Miler the first Sunday in July. It was a tradition he had established ten years earlier to gauge conditioning after five weeks of training.

The daily turnout had been consistently good and the group of nine was beginning to distinguish themselves from the rest. I was matching Dent and Kehoe mile-for-mile and we had two other juniors and three sophomores who looked like top seven material. Even a freshman was battling to join the top group.

Coach Kozak had each of us pitch in an extra ten bucks when we signed up so he could make singlets for Sunday's race. He wanted us to look like a team. The tank tops were fluorescent yellow with pale blue lettering trimmed in black.

When I arrived at the Downers Recreation Center at six-thirty in the morning, we were the only runners around. All I noticed were

race officials darting back and forth on the dewy grass. It made me wonder if we had the wrong day. At six-forty we began the team two-mile warmup shirtless on the seventy-eight-degree morning.

I was surprised how nervous I felt. Just like my first soccer game as a freshman. By the time we got back, runners were finally showing up, although most seemed to be standing around and talking while we were stretching and doing strides.

Five minutes before the race we took a last leak behind the dumpsters at the back of the Rec Center and headed over to the starting line. We hoped to grab a spot up front. The field was huge. Way bigger than what we'd seen at six-thirty. There had to be at least a thousand runners.

Over the microphone, the starter explained there would be a police car and bicycle leading the way. After the National Anthem and a blast of the air horn, we were off.

By two miles, we were clear of 99% of the runners and Cooney was still ranting about politics.

"Al Gore is such a fucking idiot. If he would have listened to the Cuban community in Miami, Elian Gonzalez would still be in the States. But noooo. He had to interfere. It's going to cost him the Cuban American support. He needs that state if he wants to be president. Now that bonehead Bush will probably win the election."

No one responded. Finally, a voice from the back shouted out, "Lighten up Cooney." Everyone chuckled.

Good to his word, Coach Kozak was at the halfway point, yelling out "30:09!" as we went by. To me it felt like we were jogging. I wasn't remotely winded even though Cooney was finally quiet. The breathing from behind was louder.

Dent turned his head side-to-side and shouted over his shoulder, "Well boys, time for 5:40's." He made a chopping motion with his hand, extending the index finger forward.

Nine were together through mile six, but the breathing behind was much heavier. At a turn after the six-mile mark, I looked over my shoulder. Cooney, Lester, and Dronski had fallen fifty meters

behind. I checked over my shoulder again at seven miles and we lost three more—Watson, Lee, and Hershberger.

Now that we were alone, Brett and Zach pushed the pace again. I followed two feet behind the pair, surprised how easy it was to stay in their wake.

With a mile remaining, Dent spit out, “Giddy up!” and we pushed the pace harder, giving it all we had. We inched towards a 5:15 pace, sprinting up the last rise into the finish as we crossed the line with arms in the air.

I slapped hands with Brett and Zach as we jogged through the chute. Damn, that felt good. It was my first test and I passed it with flying colors. I had been unusually nervous going into the race, uncertain how I would handle the pace and length. It was nice to know I had what it took.

As we downed cups of water Zach checked his running watch for our last five splits. “5:41...5:43...5:33...5:25...5:09.” He paused to calculate. “Snaps, that was awesome.” He looked up. “We ran 16:07 for the last three miles!”

Dent raised his hand for a high five. “Man, last year we were 16:40. We’re on fire!” Zach and I slapped it.

I pointed down the last straight. “Here comes Hershberger.”

Watson, Lee, and Hershberger each ran the last three miles under 17:10. Brett Dent was giving high fives like he had won the lottery. His enthusiasm was catching.

Coach Kozak rode up on his bike but hung in the background, letting us enjoy the moment. Dronski was the last one for “Kozak Track Club” but still twelfth overall.

Our captains called the team together, each of us sipping from cups of water as he talked. “Boys, great job today.” He looked at the faces. “Dronski, come here. You did a fantastic job! I know you feel like a used diaper.”

Dent smiled. “And I heard Cooney say you smell like one.” Everyone laughed.

"This is a special team. Kehoe and I have never run with such a talented group." Brett looked over at Zach and he nodded. "Keep up the work boys, and it's going to be an exciting season, very exciting."

Everyone stuck a hand into the center of the circle and shouted. "K-T-C!"

Coach Kozak came over and patted everyone on the back. He had a huge smile on his face.



The following Sunday, Dad took Julie and me into the city for the annual Sox-Cub clash at Wrigley Field. Though I knew he had been a great runner, his enthusiasm for America's pastime made me suspect he would have opted for baseball given the choice.

This was the first time I eagerly looked forward to one of his visits, although Julie showed little enthusiasm. She still treated him like a distant uncle.

Dad drove east on I-290. He skirted Buckingham Fountain and headed north on Lake Shore Drive past Addison St. towards Hollywood. He parked on Loyola Ave just north of the Lakeshore Campus. We walked across Sheridan Rd and up the stairs to the 'L' and rode south to the Addison stop. He loved the idea of taking the train.

We had great seats, fifteen rows up even with first base.

"I heard you ran the ten-miler in Downers last weekend. How did it go?" We watched a foul ball rocket into the right field stands.

"Dent, Kehoe and I ran 57:50." A cheer went up for the lucky fan who caught the foul. "We dropped two and a half minutes the last five miles."

"Wow, I'm impressed." He turned to me and nodded. "That's a good time. Especially in this heat. Coach Kozak must be excited. With three that can break fifteen minutes you guys have a realistic shot at coming home with a trophy in November." I grinned. "It's hard to believe you won't."

“You think so?”

He nodded. Wow. That would be cool.

Julie poked me and glared. “Quit hogging all the peanuts.”



Gray clouds filled the sky. The forecast said there was a 60% chance of rain, keeping all but the most serious enthusiasts away. I had been waiting all summer for this trip with Marie at Six Flags Great America. It was my chance to get an adrenaline fix.

When I was six or seven, I rode the Whizzer with Mom. Her hand was wrapped tightly around mine as the car climbed in a spiral to the top of the hill and flew through the trees at a forty-five-degree angle, at times only inches from the ground. As soon as we stopped, I begged her to take me again. The rush was as thrilling as a junkie’s high. We rode the Viper, Raging Bull, and X-Flight the rest of the afternoon, the head-first face-down Superman my favorite. I was hooked.

The remainder of July and the first week of August we continued in our routine: team runs Monday thru Friday mornings. A “Captain’s run” was added at Waterfall Glen on Sunday in the weeks following the Downers Grove race. Of all our training, this team run was the weekly experience I enjoyed the most. The easy banter in the parking lot as we assembled, mention of a York runner who got fifth in the Rock and Roll Half Marathon, that *Dumb & Dumber* sucked, or talk of a latest CD.

When Kehoe pulled into the trailhead lot, everyone knew it must be 7:59 a.m. and time to get started. Zach was never late, or early. Then it was “Let’s roll” from Brett and t-shirts flew at the trailhead sign as we jogged down the crushed gravel path.

The first Sunday in August was a hot one. It was easily 80 degrees before the ten miles had even started. The initial part of the run you would have guessed we were members of the Team in Training since we shuffled along like a bunch of old men. But after half a mile,

not one of them could have stayed with us. Inside five minutes, we overcame the lethargy and our strides opened. The pace dropped as fast as the sweat from our brow.

Crazy Cooney always had something to say about politics.

“Did you guys listen to Bush’s Convention Acceptance Speech?” he seethed. “George Bush and his henchman Dick Cheney are going to lead us into war. His policies are going to push us into an economic recession. Mark my words. All he wants is the rich to get richer and the poor to fend for themselves. What an asshole!”

“Lighten up Cooney!”

“You’ll see. Even an orangutan isn’t as stupid. That dude is mental.”

“You still going to move to Canada?” Mo made himself laugh at the suggestion.

“How about Vermont?” I couldn’t resist. “I heard they legalized civil unions. You and Mo can hook up and sell maple syrup to hippies.”

“Eat me.” Everyone got a good laugh at Cooney’s expense.

Kehoe reveled in the heat and loved to push the pace when others faded. He was the quiet one on the team, but his taciturn demeanor didn’t belie his fierceness as a competitor. Always serious, as though it was a job, by two miles he was up front alongside Dent leading the team at a 6:20 pace. By five miles we were at 6:00 flat and by seven miles we were at 5:50.

Our pack slowly disintegrated, but Zach continued to push the breakneck pace which challenged my limits. Like Air Force jets screaming across the lakefront at the Air & Water Show, we flew by the weekend runners so quickly we were already in front of them when they turned to look behind for our approach.

Even though we were teammates, neither Brett nor Zach would concede an inch to me on these up-tempo runs. They worked in tandem to test my mettle on these tune-ups for the season. In early June I was afraid I’d made a mistake in coming out for cross country.

I suspected they were assholes, simply trying to put me in my place, disdainful of a track athlete who might be contemptuous of cross country. But I quickly discovered they were doing this to make me a better runner. To make me tougher and teach me how to be patient and to sustain long sessions of stress and the gradual onslaught of pain. Like the proverbial frog thrown into a pot of tepid water, my teammates were going to turn up the heat week-by-week until it came to a boil. To provoke the response, I would need down the road against opponents who were every bit as tough and much more unforgiving.

“Fifty-seven minutes for the loop.” Brett slapped our hands. “Nice job boys.”

Draining the bottle of water as we waited in the parking lot for the rest of the guys, I basked in the pride of a good workout as we stretched in the shade. I was exhausted but happy, content with my choice to run cross country, grateful this team had the right attitude. I hadn’t been this excited about a season since my sophomore year of soccer. My junior year at GTHS started in two weeks and I could hardly wait to get going.

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