

Run Like a Girl

A Tale of a Distance Runner
During the Implementation of Title IX



A NOVEL BY JIM KNOEDEL

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Run Like a Girl 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 coaching, not a factual recount of events.

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RUN LIKE A GIRL – A TALE OF A DISTANCE RUNNER DURING THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF TITLE IX

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This book is dedicated to the coaches who have worked with females and those athletes who paved the way for today's athletes with their dedication, persistence, and hard work over the past fifty years of continued struggle towards equality.

Title IX

“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

June 23, 1972

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Chapter 1

June 1976

I stared out the car window at the field of soybeans zipping by from the seat beside dad, daydreaming about today's competition. He brought me along with the four boys for the track meet in Des Moines, Iowa's capitol city, the first time he had driven me so far to race. The boys, including my brother Steve were huddled in back, none of them willing to sit up front with me – even though they were crowded hip to hip.

“I'm not sure what races they'll have for girls...so keep that in mind.” Dad turned his head to look at me.

“I hope they let me long jump...and do you think I can high jump? I know how to scissor.” I hunched my shoulders and smiled at dad hopefully. He hunched his shoulders.

“If they do, you'll probably have to start at whatever height the boys do...so we'll see.”

That stinks. I was so hoping to high jump!

“I'm excited to run the 100 and 220. I think I can PR.” I paused. “Will I have to use blocks?” I still didn't feel comfortable in the set position, my skinny arms shivering in the awkward pose.

“Sarah, we'll worry about that when we get there.”

Much of my uniform had been altered by mom so it fit me, a girl's undershirt covering the gap beneath my armpits that this boy's singlet didn't. As if I had something to expose anyway. She also had to narrow the sides on my shorts so the boy's didn't see my underwear,

the skinny beanpoles (that's what dad always called them) for legs not remotely filling the space like it did for the boys.

Why don't they make uniforms for girls?

When we arrived at the track dad told us run two laps on the cinder track for a warmup while he registered us for events, the boys running so slow I went around to jog at a reasonable pace. I was proud of the blue and red uniforms with "Iowa River Striders" on the chest because they made us look like an official team, many other individuals running in their gym clothes, one girl in cut-offs and a white t-shirt.

"Hey bubble butt, you're blocking my view." I knew it was Billy. He was always such a jerk when parents weren't around. My brother said nothing, afraid to rock the boat.

We finished the laps, team stretches, and a pit stop by the time dad returned from registration.

"Ok, Steve, Mike, Tom, and Billy. You're all in the junior high group, even though you might run against older guys. All four of you are in the one hundred, the 440 relay, and the mile relay. Steve, you're also in the 80 yard hurdles and high jump. Mike, Tom, and Billy in the long jump." He turned to me. "Sarah, you're in the 11-12 100, 220, and the long jump. I don't think you are ready for the high jump yet so we'll put that off until the meet two weeks from today."

He saw my shoulders slump. "They're starting at 4'6" ...it's just too high."

I looked around the track for other girls. Usually there weren't many. I spotted the Des Moines Flyers over near the high jump pit, all the team decked out in the green tops and black shorts, two girls with Afros standing at the fringe of the mostly boys team, another lanky one wearing pigtails about the same size as me. Good. I'd have someone to race against. I hated racing against boys all the time.

An hour later five females lined up in the same heat of the one hundred yard dash, a shy girl in a baggy white t-shirt suddenly

joining our group. She must be a farm girl from southern Iowa, the drawl when she answered “here” to the starter giving her away. The boys were waiting behind us, one of them snickering as I touched my toes. It had to be Billy.

“Runners take your marks.” We all crouched down in the blocks, one knee on the cinders, the other off the ground, balanced high on our fingertips. I was suddenly nervous. From the corner of my eye I spotted the starter’s hand going up.

“Set.” I took a deep breath and raised my hips, staring down the track.

BANG!

Two of the DM Flyers sporting Afros jumped to the lead like they were shot from a cannon, already five feet ahead of me before we had gone twenty yards. I peeked to the side and could see the skinny farm girl a step behind, the lanky Flyer in pigtails at my side.

By forty yards our positioning remained static but by sixty yards the two up front were coming back, my pigtailed opponent slipping ahead of me an inch at a time. Catch her. I felt helpless trying to reel her back in, her speed just as good as mine.

At eighty yards, all three of us went by the pair up front, their speed waning like they were dragging anchors the last twenty yards. Five feet from the finish string I threw my arms back and stuck out my chest like dad taught us, but still lost by three feet. Dang.

I turned and reached out to shake hands, the farm girl saying, “Good race,” the three Flyers ignoring me when I turned to them. Why were they doing that? We walked towards the timers, the farm girl staying by my side. The first place timer smiled at the thin girl in pigtails from the DM Flyers.

“First place 15.2. Second.” He looked at me. “Second 15.3. Third 15.5. Fourth 16.0 and fifth 17.3.

The farm girl walked beside me in the grass back to the starting line without saying a word, both of us slowing as the gun fired for the

boys heat, turning our heads to watch Steve easily win his section. Billy was last. I smiled and then turned to the girl.

“My name’s Sarah. Sarah Tucker. What’s yours?”

“Jane. Are you doing the long jump?” I nodded my head. She continued. “But I don’t have a tape measure.”

“That’s okay. Use mine. I have one in my bag. I’ll hold it at the board. My mark is 66’10.” Just kick a spot in the grass with your heel.” She shuffled backwards as the tape measure unreeled. I shouted. “What’s your mark?”

“I don’t have any steps.” She smiled sheepishly. “So I’ll just start at yours.” I nodded.

The boys were walking back to the starting line after their race while I was on my knees holding the tape measure to the toe board. I looked around to make sure dad wasn’t near, reaching out to slap hands with Steve as he passed and then turned to Billy.

“Hey lard ass.” He glared at me. “You got your butt kicked today.” I grinned like the Cheshire Cat. With two older brothers I knew how to dish it out as well.

Competing was second nature to me, something I was expected to do if I was going to survive in this family. My father was the assistant football coach at East High and head boys track coach. We breathed sports in the Tucker family – many of my earliest memories were in the crowds at a high school football games, cheering for the team in red and blue, drinking hot chocolate with mom to keep warm.

Although I was good in sports, playing whiffle ball with my brothers in the back yard and basketball on our patio whenever the boys needed someone to even out teams, I hated being called a tom-boy, the label far too toxic for my liking. Girls talked about me like I was jealous I wasn’t a boy. Why would I want that? But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t compete fiercely – my father wouldn’t have allowed it. Neither would I.

I liked being a girl, crawling in my father's arms when I was sad, crying when I was hurt, not expected to do gross things like my brothers – like who could burp the longest or fart the loudest. I would always be my father's little girl and the thought made me happy. It wasn't an effort to act feminine, wearing dresses to church and messing with my hair before school, just like other females – but sports were the highlight of my life, winning the big motivator. I would never give them up. Nothing could match that feeling of competing, pushing my body to its limit, the rush of adrenaline from any victory so satisfying.

But as simple as my life was as an eleven year old, with each passing year things were getting more complicated, the minefield of teenage years more unpredictable. I would be starting 7th grade at Southeast Junior High after Labor Day, while Steve was entering 8th grade. My thoughts were constantly focused on navigating the unwritten rules at a new school. What clothes to wear. What activities to do. What friends to have.

Even in sixth grade there were cliques at Hoover Elementary, girl's that wore their hair the same way or groups of them who talked behind backs of people like me. I was so skinny that I got no looks from the boys at the swimming pool or well liked enough to blend in with the in-crowd of popular girls, always searching for ways to join the cool pack. It scared me to think junior high might be worse.



Monday morning after the Des Moines meet, Steve and I walked with dad the six blocks to the high school track – Billy, Tom, and Mike showing up to join us for the 9:00 workout. Unfortunately, there were no girls on our Striders. I tried to get friends to join so I had training partners, but after one or two days they always found some lame excuse to miss: claiming they had to babysit or go to a dental appointment. Sometimes nothing at all. After that it was like

I ceased to exist. As though I was that crazy girl whom they didn't want to be seen with.

"Ok, we'll get started." Dad smiled at me when I squinted from one eye into the sun. "We're going to do a 5-man relay today so we can work on exchanges." He motioned for Steve to come up. "But first, I want to show everyone how to hand off for relays." He glanced at Billy. "We stunk last week."

Dad and Steve spread out and demonstrated standing exchanges two times, dad pairing us up to practice – Steve with Billy, Tom with Mike, and me with my father. After ten times we traded places so we knew how to pass and how to receive. Then dad called us together.

"See the five cones around the track?" He pointed at each one. "Mike starts with the baton at the starting line. Billy will get it at the second cone, then to Tom at the third, Sarah on the fourth, and Steve on the fifth. Each one of you is doing ten of these eighty-eight yard distances, so you will circle the track twice. Go at the same speed you do on the mile relay. You'll know you've done ten if you finish one spot ahead of where you started."

Dad always had fun workouts, finding ways to keep me from going head to head with the boys, but still challenging me to work hard. I was good for a girl but wasn't even as fast as Billy...although I was getting closer. He was too lazy to push himself and I wasn't.

We finished the workout with ten sets of stairs, sprinting in separate aisles to the top of the football bleachers, the boys easily besting me – although by the last two I was closer to Billy than he wanted to believe. The certainty I would get him one day was my motivation. I dreamed about that day all the time, trying to come up with something clever to yell at him when I did.

Dad pulled us together after we got water from the fountain.

"Tomorrow we're going to do technique work. Everyone is going to do block starts and then we'll split up into long jump, high

jump, and hurdles. Even if you don't think these will be your best events, I still want you to learn how to do them."

I was excited because I would prove to dad I could make 4'6".

That weekend we watched the 1976 Olympic Trials on ABC, a blare of trumpets introducing the Wide World of Sports production as we crowded around the 19" color set on Saturday. Dad mentioned it was the first time the men's and women's trials were at the same site – that they were separate in 1968 and 1972. I was anxious to see the TV coverage, to watch some of the best athletes in the world, hoping to see lots of the female athletes dad talked so much about.

"It's too bad Mary Decker is injured." Dad looked at me. "Because she would have made the Olympic team in the 800. Probably the 1500 also."

I knew her name from articles in Sports Illustrated. She was just five years older than me. He smiled and nodded.

"Yep, she ran 2:02 in the indoor 880 two years ago...when she was 15!" Wow.

Sunday afternoon I sat beside dad on the couch looking forward to more coverage of the finals, but ABC showed only four women's events – ninety percent of the focus was on the males. Dad pointed out Jan Merrill, Cindy Bremser, Francie Larrieu, and Cyndy Poor in the exciting finish of the women's 1500 meters when they showed the highlight, but the only live shots were of Brenda Morehead capturing the 100 and 200 dashes, and sixteen year old Rhonda Brady winning the 100 meter hurdles.

It was thrilling to see what they could do. To dream that...I might be there one day.



"So I see you got two 2nd places and a 1st two weeks ago." Danny pointed at the bulletin board with the blue and red ribbons

as he shuffled into my bedroom, pulling Candy Dots off the paper roll as he talked. "What events?" He sat down beside me on the bed.

"I won the long jump...even though there were just two of us." I gave him a sheepish grin. "And I got second in the 100 and 220 dashes. There were five girls in those. And the 220 was my best time." I smiled proudly.

"Well, keep working hard. I have a feeling track will be your best sport." He smiled. "I'll bet you are state champion one day." He stood up. "Well, I have to go to baseball practice.

Danny was my oldest brother and my biggest supporter. He going to be a sophomore at East High, his sports basketball and baseball, track the one activity dad let him drop after ninth grade. He was also my guardian angel, always standing up for me when the boys got too rough or picked on me in neighborhood games.

He gave Steve a "pink belly" one day when my brother yelled at me for hitting a pop-up in whiffle ball, holding Steve down and smacking his bare stomach with an open hand until it turned red. Tom and Mike laughed, but knew enough to take it easy on me. They'd get the same if they weren't careful. But Billy wasn't as clever. Danny found a million ways to torture him, tossing his shirt up in a tree, or giving him a wedgie, the waistband of his underwear yanked on so hard they were hanging out of his cutoffs like a duck's tail.

Why my younger brother and Billy were such good friends was beyond me.

We drove thirty miles north for the Iowa AAU Championship six day after the 4th of July bicentennial fireworks, our final meet of the summer up at Kingston Stadium in Cedar Rapids. I was so nervous, barely sleeping the night before, worried how I would do at this championship meet. I was competing in four events – the 100, 220, 440, and long jump.

As always, I rode in the front seat alongside dad, staring out the window lost in thought, smiling at a dream of medals hanging on

my bulletin board – even gold medals. But it wasn't going to be easy because Angela, the lanky girl from the Des Moines Flyers, would be in all three of my running events. Yet the real reason I couldn't sleep was that I'd never run the 440 – the quarter mile.

Everyone spoke of the painful race with a profound reverence – as though finishing the race was like surviving the jump off a thirty foot bluff at the Coralville Reservoir. I wondered how I would handle the challenge today?

I sat in the shade of the baseball stadium bleachers next door to the track, pleased after my performance in the long jump, besting my farm friend Jane by four inches and a girl from Waterloo by one. I turned the gold medal over to reread the inscription – one which hadn't changed from five minutes ago.

"1st place 11-12 Long Jump." It made me smile.

Dad told me to avoid the heat, but my motivation to stay out of the sun was so I wouldn't get a farmer's tan, afraid Gail Burger, our next door neighbor, would make fun of me if I came home with a red neck and white shoulders. She was in Steve's class and always commenting on anything that didn't meet with her snobbish standards. Like my clothes from Penny's or unpainted fingernails lined with dirt, or even the blond hairs on my legs. She annoyed me so much. I wanted to pinch her. Hard.

I stood in lane two for the one hundred yard dash in my red singlet and navy shorts, shaking hands with the girl in lane one who wore a bra under her tank top, smiling at Jane just to my right. Angela Davis, the Des Moines Flyer was in lane four, staring down the track with a fierce intensity, her teammates cheering from the stands.

"Take your marks." I knelt down and pushed my tennis shoes into the blocks, taking a deep breath. "Set."

The gun exploded and we were off. It felt like the race was over in the snap of fingers. A timer walked up to me, saying 15.0, asking for my last name. I slapped hands with Jane and then the girl in lane

one, overhearing 14.7 from Angela's timer, patting her on the back and saying "Congratulations" before I walked up in the stands to sit with dad. He smiled as I approached.

"Great job! Your best of the season." He cleared the stopwatch.

"What place did I get?"

"Third. You beat the girl from the long jump, and Jane by one step. That was good...now let's talk about the 440." My elation fell at the mention. "I know you doubt me but I guarantee you are going to win." He smiled and nodded. I wish I had so much confidence.

When we heard the starter's pistol both of us turned to watch Steve burst from the blocks in the 13-14 100 yard dash, my brother staying even with the field for fifty yards but closing better and winning the race by a step. We both jumped up and cheered from the stands as he waved to us with a smile, waiting to hear his time from the officials. Dad clapped his hands and turned to me.

"Okay. Here's the strategy. You're in lane three and Angela is in four. When you cut in at the 110 yard mark be sure you stay on her tail all the way to the 220...don't let her get away. I guarantee she'll get out fast." He gave me a serious look. "Coming out of the last turn I want you to move out to lane two and give it everything you got." He nodded again. "Don't slow down until you are two steps past the string." I pursed my lips and nodded, my eyes dropping to the ground.

What had I just agreed to?

The next forty minutes were filled with dread. The thought of all the pain. The embarrassment of performing poorly. The doubt I still had in dad's words. But then, you never know. And I'll be a monkey's uncle if it didn't turn out exactly as he said.

After I finished I lifted hands off my knees and stood, walking over to pat Angela on the back, still amazed dad's words had come true. He explained later in the bleachers this was the first time anyone had been so close to her at the 220, that my presence unnerved

her. When I pulled into lane two on the final straight her resistance disappeared like a puff of smoke and before I knew it the string was running across my chest.

As exhausted as I was, my heart was smiling, amazed I was so good at this new event.

Later on I got fourth in the 220, sitting in the stands to watch Angela anchor her team to victory with an amazing leg. Steve did the same thing ten minutes later, taking the baton from Billy and going from third to second, and with fifty yards left, into first, Mike and Tom catching him at the line in a bear hug when he won.

While we waited in the stands for our four to finish their cool down, someone approach from above and slid next to me.

"I wanted to congratulate you on the win." Oh my God. It was Angela. She smiled at me. "No one has ever been near me halfway, so your victory was the real deal."

"Thanks Angela." I smiled. "And you had three awesome victories today." She grinned.

"Well, I gotta go. But I look forward to seeing you next year." She stood. "See ya Sarah."

"See ya Angela." I waved as she rejoined her team.

That evening my family watched the lighting of the Olympic Flame in Montreal, a day later 14-year-old gymnast Nadia Comaneci of Romania scoring her first ten on the uneven bars, repeating the perfect mark six more times over the five days of competition. I watched her every night beside mom, my eyes glued to the television as Nadia performed her routines. She looked no different than me, in fact almost the same size. But her talent was astounding, far better than anything I'd ever achieved.

Then there were the Soviet and East German women's swimmers. When ABC segued to the pool they looked more like males than females, the rumors of steroid use by the Communist teams hard to

dispute, their muscle definition in shoulders and chest impossible to believe. Yuk. They looked so gross.

Track and field began the second week of the Olympics, Lasse Viren winning the 10K and 5K, just as he did four years earlier in Munich, the lanky Finn outkicking the field to grab both golds. I was bummed that women were still not allowed to compete at either of these distances, the 1500 meters their longest event. Did they really think girls couldn't race that far? It seemed so stupid.

We caught a glimpse of American Jan Merrill in the final of the metric mile, her 4:08.54 (Wow!) not enough to beat two East Germans and the winning 4:05.48 by a Russian – all of them probably cheating just like their swimming compatriots. I was certain Jan must have been frustrated by their win.

Seeing her in the final made me think it would be cool to be there one day. I guess I can always dream.

Chapter 2

September 1976

I was more nervous for the first day at Southeast Junior High than I was for my 440 race last summer. On the bus ride to school I sat beside a random girl on a seat halfway down the aisle, Steve and Tom joining Billy and Mike in the last couple of rows. I glanced around to see if I fit in, hoping my denim bellbottoms and flowered white smock looked cool.

Out of nervousness I rubbed the bubblegum flavored gloss across my lips for the second time as I climbed down the bus steps in front of the school, not bothering to say goodbye to Steve. He'd ignore me anyway. There was not a single face I recognized in the crowd. I walked in the general direction of my locker trying to remember how to get there, smirking as I put in the combination: 31-23-30. The same as my measurements.

In homeroom I listened to announcements over the intercom, the assistant principal welcoming us to the new school year, mentioning after school opportunities for students in football, cheerleading, chorus, and theatre. There wasn't one fall sport for the girls. Bummer. I stared at the notecard listing the class schedule, trying to remember where each was located, psyching myself for the challenges ahead.

Judy Thompson was in the desk next to me, a girl who had been in my class at Hoover Elementary, agreeing to walk together to social studies class when we discovered we both had it next period. We were never close friends; in fact, she was the most unathletic person

I knew, but walking with her to class was better than walking alone. She wore glasses and had a pear-shaped body with something to fill her bra, although that wasn't the shape I had in mind whenever I longed for something more to fill mine.

I got through Mr. Walters lecture about the Bill of Rights without yawning, was amused by Mr. Villareal's jokes in science class, and looked forward to Home Economics class third period. As Mrs. Lepic described the material over the semester I was intrigued with sewing, making a dress sounded like fun; though I was less interested in food preparation and home management; a rumor circulating in class that sex education would be taught later in the semester. Even though we talked about it all the time, I still didn't have a clue how sex worked.

There were already cliques in my classes, girls in matching outfits at the back of Home Econ talking about cheerleading tryouts, others like me, sitting along the edges of the room, the goodie-two-shoes on the front row raising hands and asking questions.

I was excited about gym class after lunch because it meant activity, but less enthused about the gym clothes we had to wear – a zippered one-piece outfit. The only thing that saved me from embarrassment was that every girl had to wear the same thing. Even the cool girls looked like dorks. But I was nervous about having to take a shower in front of twenty-five other girls.

"Dad, I'm already bored without sports. And I'm not interested in basketball." He had his arm around me on the couch during a commercial for All in the Family Wednesday evening. "We have track in the spring but I don't want to wait that long. Steve has football...and probably basketball to keep him busy, but for girls there's nothing."

"It's your lucky day because I talked with the cross country coach this morning and Coach Forwald said you can join the team next week. He is desperate for more. So how's that sound?"

I wasn't excited about a race two miles long but...it might help me run a faster 440 next spring.

“Okay, I’m in.” I smiled.

On Monday I rode my bike to Southeast Junior High in the morning so I could pedal the mile over to East High after classes for the 3:15 practice. I changed into my navy meet shorts and a white t-shirt in the bathroom stall at the entrance to the gymnasium, stopping at the mirror to pull my hair into pigtails before I headed out. I was so nervous as I shuffled towards the cross country coach, dragging my feet across the grass.

Coach Forwald greeted me with a grin as I approached the bleachers by the tennis courts with my backpack over a shoulder, the boys glancing at me as I neared. In the background I could hear whistles from football practice – one of them was dad’s.

“So you’re Joe’s daughter.” I smiled and nodded. “Sarah, right?” I nodded again. “Well, I’ll introduce you to the team when they all get here...then just follow along.” He looked over and saw another group walking our way. “Good, Shelly is here.” Coach Forwald waved her over.

“Hey Shelly, this is Sarah Tucker. Sarah is going to join you on the team this fall.” I smiled and nodded awkwardly, uncertain whether I should shake hands. “Shelly’s a freshman.” She was about 5’5”, two inches taller than me, her blond hair tied back in a thick ponytail. I followed her to a seat on the far end of the bleachers. Should I try that instead of pigtails? It looks so much more mature. Shelly smiled at one of the boys and got a nod, but none of the others acknowledged us as we walked past.

“So you’re in 7th grade?” I nodded. “I’m so glad to have another girl. It stinks being the only one.”

When everyone showed up Coach Forwald sent us off on a mile warmup around the school grounds, Shelly pointing at boys up ahead as we jogged behind. I estimated there were about fifteen or sixteen.

"That red-head up front, that's Mike Gedlinski...and the one beside him is Davey Jones. They're both seniors and the best ones on the team. And see the one in the black Converse All-Stars?" I nodded as she pointed and grinned. "That's my boyfriend...Andy Aldeman."

"Wow. That's cool." So that's why she smiled at the boy earlier. A boyfriend. I doubted I would ever have one.

"He's a freshman. I'm hoping he will be the top runner on the frosh/soph squad.

Coach Forwald watched as the captains led us through calisthenics, the same ones dad taught us during the summer, waiting as three whistles blasted in the background before he could explain the workout.

"Okay. We're going to jog down to the track and do 2-man relays, each of you alternating 440's. We'll do five and then see how you feel."

Shelly and I got through the five without problem, some of the relay teams lagging behind us on the last one. I suspected they were freshmen. Even though we didn't get times I could tell Shelly was a good runner, her technique far smoother than many of the boys. She slapped my hand when I finished the last one, happy with my effort.

Coach Forwald called us together after the last pair of freshmen finished the initial five.

"Okay, I want two sets of twenty-five teeter-totter sit-ups and ten push-ups with your partner."

Shelly plopped on her back in the grass and told me to sit on her red Puma's, lifting her hips so she could sit on mine. I could see what we were doing. She went up until elbows hit her knees, saying "1" as she laid back down, then I went up and down. By ten we had a good sit-up rhythm going. I looked around and noticed we were the third group to finish, a grin our faces.

She rolled over on her stomach into a push-up position with her knees on the ground, nodding at me to follow as she did the first

one. After ten we went back to the teeter-totter sit-ups, racing through the twenty-five as fast as we could, making faces at each other after every repetition. We were the second group to finish the ten push-ups. I could tell she wanted to beat all the boys.

“Let’s see how many more 440’s you can handle.” Coach smiled. “I want anywhere from two to five.”

Two groups quit after two sets, Shelly and I alternating through three circuits of the track, only two pairs making through all five. I was tired but could have done all of them if I had to. When all the boys finished Coach Forward smiled at us.

“OK. Two more sets of sit-ups and push-ups and then jog four laps around the track for your cool down.”

After we were done coach called Shelly and me over as the boys walked towards the locker room.

“That was a good workout today.” He looked at Shelly. “I could tell it helped to have another girl.” She smiled. Then he looked at me. “And Sarah, you did a good job. Your dad told me you would...he was right.” His words made me beam.

We walked towards the gymnasium talking about the season, Shelly telling me that I could share her PE locker from now on. I’d need to because there was no girls athletic locker room like the boys had. She asked me to wait while she went to the bathroom with a washcloth to clean up, spraying Jovan Musk on her neck before we left for home.

Andy was waiting by the back door, his hair still wet from the shower, reaching out to shake my hand when Shelly introduced me. I grabbed my bike and the three of us walked towards the Court Hill area of Iowa City, splitting up as they went east and I went west.

I took a shower and then did my math homework at the kitchen table while mom made supper, waiting for Steve, Danny, and dad to come home from football practice.

“How did cross country practice go?” Mom looked over her shoulder as she stirred.

“It was fun. I did good. There’s another girl on the team, Shelly Johnson, so I have someone to run with.”

“Great. When is your first meet?”

“Well, the boys have a dual meet on Thursday, but Muscatine doesn’t have any girls, so we won’t run until Saturday, up in Cedar Rapids. Washington has an invitational...at Noelridge Park.

Coach Forwald had us sit in the seat by the front door of the school bus, my red meet sweats a size too big. I was afraid I looked like a dork, forced to fold the waistband of sweatpants twice so they didn’t drag on the ground. At least the tank top and shorts fit reasonably well – although I still had to wear an undershirt because it was a boys singlet.

When the bus took off Shelly talked about the movie *Andy* and her went to last night as I stared at the spikes on the floor. I was so jealous. I still didn’t have any.

“We saw *Bad News Bears* at the Varsity Theater...it’s a baseball movie with Tatum O’Neal, you know, that girl who was in *Paper Moon*.” Shelly turned to see what coach was doing and then leaned into me, whispering towards my ear. “But we were so busy making out I don’t remember much of the show. Andy even tried to give me a French kiss.” She giggled with a hand over her mouth. Coach Forwald looked up from his papers as she quickly turned her head.

What’s a French kiss? I lifted my eyebrows and smiled like I knew.

“So anyway.” She resumed in a normal voice. “Coach said Bettendorf, Decorah, North Tama...and I think it was Washington who will have full teams, but a lot of the schools are like us – have less than four. So we can’t score.” She hunched her shoulders. “But we can still get ribbons if we run well.” A grin filled her face at the thought.

Ninety minutes later I stood at the starting line beside Shelly, looking to the right and left at the forty-plus girls lined up on either side, two Linn-Mar runners sharing the starting box with us. When I asked Shelly what our strategy was before the race she giggled and said, "Just run with me."

The gun went off and we sprinted to the front of the V like anxious members of the Oklahoma Land Rush, a skinny girl in all red and a much shorter one in a white top leading the field, the pair only ten yards in front of us. I glanced to my right to make sure Shelly was still there, her blond ponytail snapping side to side as we ran alongside a small pond. I didn't have a clue what I was doing, hanging onto my teammate like my life depended on it. I should have peed once more.

The insane tempo finally settled into a more comfortable rhythm even though my breaths continued to come as fast as Shelly's, the thought of two miles unnerving. This was worse than practice. We flew past a playground, a few of the junior varsity boys cheering us on as they sat on the swings – they were supposed to be cooling down after their race.

A glance around our pack showed that it had whittled down to seven as we made the U-turn just past the mile maker, the thought of another mile sounding impossible. I was already breathing so rapidly I didn't know if I could last much longer. This is stupid. Why did I agree to come out for cross country?

With a quarter mile remaining my breaths were ragged, quads screaming at me to slow down, each leg feeling like I was on the twenty-fifth flight of stairs. I'm dying. Down the final straight runners went by me one by one and I dropped into ninth place, my body whimpering like a chastened dog as I crossed the chalked line and walked through the chutes. I wanted to collapse on the ground.

This is WORSE than a quarter mile on the track!

I walked with hands atop my head, breaths coming out in rapid bursts, sweat rolling down my temples on the warm fall day as I tried to slow my breathing. After an official wrote down my number at the

end of the flagged chute, I dropped to the grass like I was shot by a sniper's bullet. This hurts so much.

Covering my eyebrows with a forearm, I tried to keep the sun out of my eyes, annoyed by its brightness. A small girl in a white jersey with "Hedrick" on the chest bent down and patted me on the shoulder saying, "Nice race."

Seconds later Shelly reached out and pulled me to my feet.

"C'mon lazybones. Get up. We need to walk around."

Coach Forwald approached and patted us each on the back.

"Good efforts girls. 12:21 and 12:30. A good start to the season." He smiled. "When you catch your breath get a mile cool down and then cheer on the varsity boys."

I was quiet on the bus ride home, mostly because I was so tired, but also because there was something about this sport – facing the pain and rising to the challenge that appealed to me. It wasn't that I liked to suffer. Because I definitely didn't. But I liked overcoming the battle going on inside my head. The pride I gained from overcoming the adversity. The same way I felt after the 440 win last summer. Maybe this wasn't going to be as bad as I thought.

I looked down at the white ribbon in my hand, sighing as I stared out the bus window.



I made three new friends at Southeast Junior High so middle school was okay; English, math, and social studies pretty easy, only Science challenging me; Home Economics teaching me the basics of baking and sewing. Though we had nothing yet, rumors of a sex education later in the semester continued to spread.

Sally Tester was my partner in Home Econ class, sitting in the desk behind, braiding my straw colored hair before Mrs. Lepic began. On weekends she showed me how to knit and crochet at her house,

even helping me designing a macrame hanger for the airplane plant in my bedroom.

Sally had an infectious laugh and loved to slip me crazy notes during class, my sudden laughter often leading to stern glances from Mrs. Lepic. One day it was, "Mrs. Lepic likes to do it with Mr. Walters!" with a smiley face up top, a cough of laughter escaping my mouth as I quickly stuck the note in my pocket, looking to my right and pretending it was from the girl next to me.

But the day when Sally gave me one with, "Do you think we could put marijuana in the brownies?" while we crowded around Mrs. Lepic as she demonstrated how to crack an egg in the mixing bowl, crossed the line. Mrs. Lepic banished me to the hallway because of my laughter, meekly meeting the eyes of teachers strolling by who asked what I was doing. I hoped they didn't know dad.

Marie Munson and Annette Anderson were in my PE class after lunch, their nerdy black high-top Converse All-Stars so unique. The pair were always clownish and acted like spazzes around Mrs. Pundt, pretending like they were trying to do their best. I was drawn to their crazy antics, laughing whenever they pulled off the stunts, clustering together with the pair when teams were chosen.

Often times they wore the hideous one-piece gym uniforms backwards, commenting that the outfits weren't very stylish, alluding to the possibility that these should be for boys. They loved my compliments on the outlandish look. "You look marvelous!"

During class activities they would miss free throws by ten feet or spin in circles whenever they swung at a softball, falling to the ground like klutzes, getting up with goofy smiles. They were a Mutt & Jeff – Marie the much more boisterous of the two was dark-haired and short, Annette a tall blond whose father was a professor at the university, the pair never worried about what others thought.

There was never a dull moment in gym class.

Gail made the eighth grade cheerleading squad that fall, walking down hallways on game days in the uniform alongside her snobbish girlfriends, acting like she was Queen for a Day. My next door neighbor was caught between wanting to ignore me because I was such an outsider, yet desperately looking for my approval because she wanted to date my brother. Steve was the quarterback on the football team at Southeast – the position she had her sights set on.

Life was good.



I fell into the routine of school and cross country practice in September, Shelly and I working in tandem to move our way up the ladder on the team, our performances on the weekends finally gaining a bit of respect from the boys – even though it was still awkward to be the only girls. As much as Shelly tried, she was unable to attract other runners from East High, both of us coming to grips with the fact that we were it. Bummer.

The first weekend in October, at the Davenport West invitational, we got 3rd and 8th, Shelly outkicking two runners from Moline on the final straight. Fifty-six girls from Iowa and Illinois strung out behind me as I walked through the chutes. I was finally comfortable with the two miles, tired after every race but able to maintain my feet, aware I was getting stronger and racing better every week.

After the invitational, Coach Forwald stopped at Hardees (ladies first in line) before we left Davenport, Andy joining Shelly and me in the booth we grabbed. I didn't mind sitting on one side of the bench talking with the couple but was surprised when Scott slid in to sit beside me. He and Andy were good friends so I presumed that was the reason, but when Scott directed his attention to me, asking questions about my classes at Southeast, I was a little surprised. And a bit smitten.

After everyone finished eating we got back on the bus, sitting in our usual seats up front for the hour ride home. Shelly leaned over with a smile as the bus pulled onto the interstate.

“So what’s up with Scott?” She batted her eyelashes at me. “Are you fishing for a boyfriend?”

I turned beet red.

“Na...no. He just sat down. I...I”

“Don’t worry. I just kidding. He’s been asking Danny about you so I suspect he was just looking for a way to talk. You know, it’s hard to at practice, and I think he saw the chance.” She smiled again. “Homecoming is approaching and you never know...”

I sighed. It hadn’t occurred to me I could be going to a high school dance. And then another thought hit me. Would dad and mom even let me go?



There was no conference meet for Shelly and me because there weren’t enough girls teams in the Mississippi Valley Conference, but we were still eligible to run at districts the following weekend. The top two individuals in the Davenport district that were not part of a team could qualify for State. We intended to be the ones who got those spots.

We trained together on Thursday while the boys took it easy in preparation for the MVC meet, running repeats on the two block hill along 1st Ave, hoping we could successfully get through six. The first one was easy but by the third one I questioned whether we would complete the half dozen, my quads so tired it felt like we were running the repetitions through sand.

On the fourth one my breaths were harsh and rapid as we jogged down the hill, by the fifth interval it was hard to prevent myself from asking Shelly if we should stop. I was exhausted. We toed a crack on the sidewalk for the last one, smiling at each other

after taking a deep breath, leaning forward to get momentum to start. I know it wasn't the fastest one but we gave it our all, coming to a complete stop five feet past the telephone pole.

Shelly finally pulled hands off knees and looked at me with a big grin.

"We must be nuts."

I was too tired to reply.

I didn't sleep well the night before the October 23rd district race, certain it was nerves that made me irritable. I had toast for breakfast, my stomach still queasy as I climbed the steps of the bus for the thirty minute ride. Shelly looked at me with big eyes as she slid into the seat.

"What's wrong?"

"I feel like crap. I don't know what it is, but a bug's got me. Maybe if I rest on the way up I'll feel better." I closed my eyes and leaned against the window but couldn't sleep, nausea overtaking me in waves. I was so stressed out I thought I would cry.

I must have fallen asleep.

Centrifugal force pushed me into Shelly as the bus made a big turn. I opened my eyes as it pulled into the Noelridge parking lot, certain Shelly had just spilled water in my lap. Sneaking a peek at her I noticed she was still reading the article in Seventeen magazine on "Why do boys hide how they feel?" Was my mind playing tricks on me?

I turned away from Shelly and subtly reached under the waistband of my running shorts, sitting up with a jolt. Oh my God. I'm bleeding! I turned to Shelly with eyes the size of frisbees, afraid to move my legs.

"Shelly." I leaned towards her and whispered. "I'm bleeding." I nodded between my legs. She gasped and put a hand over her mouth.

"Let me think. Let me think." She whispered as the bus pulled to a stop. "Okay, first of all. It's just your period." Shelly nodded and

leaned into my ear again. “I have a sanitary napkin in my backpack but you can’t put it on in the bus. So here’s what we are going to do...”

She told Coach Forwald that I was extra tired and going to stay on the bus before my race. He stepped off and the boys followed, glancing at us as they filed down the stairs. Shelly came back three minutes later and coaxed the driver outside with whispered words, pulling out a handful of paper towels from her gym bag.

I began crying, tears running down my cheeks in a steady stream.

“Don’t worry. It’s not a big deal.” She closed the bus door with the handle and locked it, sliding a towel over the open window, pushing it up for privacy.

“Okay. Here’s what you’re going to do. I let you clean up...I’m going to stand beside you and make sure no one comes in.” She cupped my chin. “Okay?” I nodded through tears. “Then we’ll head to the bathroom.”

Needless to say, I didn’t qualify for the State Meet – although Shelly did, somehow pulling her act together after the inauspicious start in the parking lot.

Chapter 3

November 1976

Even though the season finished abruptly, it finally gave me time to spend with my new friends at Southeast Junior High.

The Saturday morning Shelly was running at the State Meet, I was riding my bike to the Iowa City Recreation Center to meet Sally Tester to work on art projects. I was so excited. In Home Econ class she described the myriad of projects she worked on – shaping clay on a potter’s wheel, creating designs to embroider on blouses, and making macrame holders for plants. I was always at meets and never got the chance to join her. Now I could.

Today we would be throwing pots.

Sally cut a hunk of clay with some wire and slapped it in my hand so we could start wedging, both of us wearing our father’s old work shirts to keep clothes clean.

“The object is to get air bubbles out of the clay.” She demonstrated. “So it doesn’t explode in the kiln when it’s baking.”

I spent the morning learning how to center the clay on the wheel, experimenting with various ideas, laughing like a lunatic when she asked if my project was a bowl or a candle holder. It was fun to feel the medium respond to pressure from my fingers, to discover how to create a useful object from...a lump of clay. After the initial failure I pulled the clay off my wheel and reshaped it into a roundish slab, hoping to fashion a better look. My attempt at a candle holder was the most pathetic one I’d ever seen.

Sally looked at me and hid a laugh.

“I forgot to tell you about the next part...how to re-prep the clay.” She covered her mouth with the back of a hand and giggled. “I like to pretend this is Mr. Walters.” She held up the clump of clay. We both started laughing.

“What’s that Mr. Walters?” She looked over at me and then slammed the clay on the table. “You don’t think I deserve an A in science?” She picked it up and slammed the clay again. I started to laugh. “You mean you didn’t like me saying that your eyebrows look like caterpillars?”

We had to stop, both of us laughing so hard we bent over.

I was surprised to look up to see the clock nearing noon, Sally showing me where to put the supplies, and how to clean up the mess, saddened that our time was over. Afterward we bought pop and shared a bag of Fritos from the vending machine downstairs, sitting behind the glass observation area overlooking the swimming pool with our snacks, watching lifeguards teach little kids to swim in the shallow end, laughing at the fat guy in Speedos when he climbed out of the pool.

On Sunday afternoon I biked to Summit Street, Marie already at Annette’s house when I arrived, the pair listening to the latest Joni Mitchell album in her room. We laid sideways across the bed and talked about classes, Marie and Annette occasionally harmonizing to the songs they liked. Both of them possessed beautiful voices when they sang a cappella, their harmonies even better when accompanied by Annette’s guitar – and without my voice.

“I’m sure Mrs. Pundt thinks you two are the weirdest girls she’s ever had.” I laughed. “But that’s exactly why I like you. I take gym class too seriously and you remind me that it’s supposed to be fun.” I grinned. “Although if you keep jerking like a spaz every time I shoot a free throw, I’m afraid I’ll pee my pants.” They laughed.

Marie jumped up and grabbed a ukulele off the desk, strumming the 4-string like it was on fire, singing in a nasal voice as she gyrated around the room like Elvis Presley.

“Oh my darlin, oh my darlin, Oh my darlin Clementine. She is lost and gone forever, oh my darlin Clementine...”

Annette pulled me off the bed and we danced as though jolted by an electric shock, both of us laughing at Marie’s silly voice. I could tell they were going to be my best friends.



“5...4...3...2...1” Danny stole the ball from the Jefferson HS guard, racing downcourt for a layup just as the halftime buzzer sounded to put East High back in the lead. My parents jumped to their feet, dad leaning over to give me a hug, all of us cheering for my brother. The cheerleaders formed a tunnel with their pom-poms as the home team jogged off the court to the locker room for the half-time break.

“That was great! I could see he was just waiting for that cross-court pass.” Dad grinned. “All those block starts in track provided the explosiveness.”

At that moment someone tapped me on the shoulder and sat down at my hip. I smiled and reached out to hug her, the musk perfume so familiar.

“Shelly, wow! It’s so good to see you.” I turned to my parents, a grin filling my face. “This is Shelly, my teammate in cross country.” I put an arm over her shoulders as she leaned forward and waved, my mother asking where she lived and the names of her parents. I puckered my face when dad started to join in, tired of their twenty questions. She was my friend and we needed to talk.

Dad must have recognized the look because they stood and said they were going to get popcorn. Shelly turned to me.

"Andy says hi." She pointed up above and I waved at her boyfriend, pulling my hand down but waving again when I saw Scott Miller beside him. I sighed and Shelly continued.

"So it must be a drag to go weeks on end without seeing me." Shelly started laughing. "I mean, I'm probably the most popular girl at East High." We both busted out with laughter.

"Gosh, I miss you so much. I wouldn't have been able to run cross country if it weren't for you." She started talking about her Thanksgiving, but I cut in when I suddenly remembered a question that had been burning in my mind. I glanced over to make sure no one was near and then leaned into her, cupping a hand by my mouth as I whispered at her ear.

"How did you get the bus driver to leave so quickly...you know...that day at the district meet? I mean, he jumped off the bus like it was on fire." Shelly covered her mouth and giggled.

"I used my fiercest face and said to him, if you don't get off the bus right now I'm going to scream at the top of my lungs. Well, his eyes doubled in size." Shelly snapped her fingers. "And he was out the door like that. His feet never touched the steps."

We were laughing so hard that fans around us gave us the stink eye.

"One more thing and then I'll go." Shelly grabbed my hand. "When classes resume after Christmas break, do you want to meet after school two or three times a week to do some workouts? You know, maybe run circuits on the gymnasium stairs or do laps on the first and second floors of the school." She leaned towards me with her hands together in prayer.

"Sure, that would be great! I'm in."

We gave each other a long hug and then she started up the stairs to rejoin her boyfriend.

"See ya!" I waved until she blended into the crowd.

Dad explained to the East High teachers we would be jogging in the hallways after school so we didn't get any grief from them, but we still had to be quiet or he made it crystal clear that there would be trouble.

As we jogged Shelly talked about her boyfriend and the things they did on weekends; describing in detail the dress she and her mom made for Winter Formal and the beautiful corsage Andy bought; giggling when she explained how he tried to pin it on with her mom watching.

Shelly leaned over and whispered with a hand cupped over her mouth as we jogged across the second floor.

"He couldn't figure out how to do it without touching by boobs!"

When I erupted in laughter Mr. Campbell stuck his head out of the classroom door and glared at us. We both dropped heads and acted contrite, pulling imaginary zippers across mouths, a pinched smile on our faces as he closed the chemistry lab door.

The snow and cold of winter stormed by and our conditioning improved, both of us excited for the season ahead. I was so grateful to have Shelly to train with for two months, knowing I would be in good shape when junior high practice started in March.

It was hard to guess my level of fitness but there were tips that told me I was in great shape. The all-out efforts up the stairs on the February runs, the speed we flew down the hall in the last five minutes or our workout, the haste our breathing returned to normal after the last sprint – all good signs.

The anticipation of my first Southeast Junior High track practice was way more exciting than the real thing. Before it was even over I was already bored – just as I was after the sex education film last semester.

“Millions of male sperm swim through the fluid in the female’s cervix, one lucky tadpole...”

The team was so lame. None of them wanted to work hard. There were twenty-four girls from the two grades, but twenty of them were so pathetic a casual observer would have guessed we were a special ed gym class and not a girls track team. After a week of doing extra work on my own I talked with dad at supper.

“Dad, do you think I can run with the girls team at East High? I mean...honestly, if I competed against all the girls at Southeast in a meet, I bet I would win every event. Even the shot.” I held my hands together. “Please. You have to talk with the girls coach.”

Monday I biked to East High after school, just as I had during cross country, sharing Shelly’s locker as we changed for practice. Coach Raffensperger welcomed me with a big smile, grateful that my addition would mean our relay teams would be competitive. I was just happy to have people that would push me to work hard.

Weather at the initial practices was iffy, the early April temperatures dropping rapidly as the sun began to set, the sweat that soaked my t-shirt during the workout chilling me to the bone between repetitions. As tired as I was, I loved the challenge of completing a tough workout, pushing myself to exhaustion, driven to improve times each week.

Shelly and I walked ahead of the other two sprinters as we neared the 220 yard dash starting line, waiting for a group of boys to slip by on the inside lanes so we could jump in, looking over shoulders to see if the girls were ready before we took off. Shelly smiled at me.

“Last one. Make it good.”

We lost Rachel and Sandra before we had gone ten yards, both of us hopeful our tenth interval would be the fastest. The two sophomores crossed the line seven seconds later, Rachel cartwheeling sideways off the track and into the grass infield like an airplane with

one wing. Sandra slid to the turf in slow motion, staring up at the clouds as she landed on her back.

Shelly slapped hands with me and then turned to her recumbent teammates.

“Great job girls!” Shelly touched them each on the forehead. “Two weeks ago you only did six. You’re getting stronger.” Shelly nodded at me. “We were bookin’! We just ran 35.8 on the last one. That was our best ever!”

“Yeah, but I was hoping I would get a thirty-four something.” Shelly smirked at my wish.

“As if.”

We extended hands to the girls on the grass.

“Time to get up. You’ll cramp up if you don’t move.”

Coach Raffensperger approached.

“Girls, that was phenomenal. Don’t listen to that guff about people saying you shouldn’t work so hard – that you can’t handle a tough workload. That’s baloney. You can. So keep it up. You four are going to be conference champions in the mile relay...this year.” He nodded as we looked at each other from the corner of eyes. He paused. “Okay, get a two lap cool down and hit the showers.”

Except we never did. We always showered at home.

The early April meets were all duals or triangulars, helping our sprint crew prepare for what lay down the road, and demonstrate how talented our foursome were – even though times weren’t too impressive. I was glad that Coach Raffensperger, “Raff” as everyone called him, let me compete at East High, the marks I read of in the weekly Southeast Junior High newspaper unimpressive. I would have been so frustrated racing against seventh and eighth graders.

I finally got spikes, tired of being the only one on the team without a pair – although they were so lame I wasn’t sure if I was happy or embarrassed. Dad had pulled the ancient pair from somewhere far

back in the track storeroom, the shoes so dilapidated I didn't know how long they would last. Although they were lightweight, they were at least two sizes too big, the girls laughing when I said they looked like clown shoes. Even with two pairs of socks I had to tie them so tight that the eyelets met on top of my arch.

How embarrassing.

The Kennedy Invite at Kingston Stadium on April 19th would be our biggest track competition to date, racing against teams from Bettendorf, Cedar Rapids Kennedy, Cedar Rapids Washington, and North Tama, all strong squads that could match any of the best in the state. Rumor had it that there was a Kennedy sprinter who had broken 1:00 in the 440. I would face her in the race in Cedar Rapids. Oh shit.

That Saturday morning Dad set a present on the table while I spooned cereal into my mouth, the gift wrapped in brown A&P grocery store paper, a hastily tied red ribbon encircling the box. It was obvious he had done it himself – the open ends were enclosed with half a roll of scotch tape to keep them in place.

“What is it?” Dad rolled his eyes.

I tore into the paper, the condition of the royal blue Adidas box indicating whatever inside was new. A shiver of excitement traveled through my body. I pulled off the lid, pushing the tissue paper aside, a new pair of Meteor spikes underneath. My eyes were the size of frisbees.

“Oh my God. Thanks dad!” I gave him a quick hug, untying the shoestrings so I could slip them on at the kitchen table. “These are so cool.” He smiled proudly.

“I had to order them from Vic Youngs. Just remember to put in the ¼” spikes because you'll be running on an all-weather track today. Not cinders.”

Shelly gushed at my new spikes in the locker room before we left for the meet, claiming my 220 would be a second faster and my

quarter mile two. On the bus ride to Cedar Rapids she talked about going to “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” last night with her boyfriend, Andy a huge Sci-Fi geek. Shelly grinned and then leaned into me, whispering that they made out for most of the movie.

“I let him get to second base.” Shelly smiled when she saw the puzzled look on my face. “You know...his hand was on my boobs while we were kissing.”

My eyebrows went up an inch, Shelly bursting into laughter at the reaction. So that’s what second base is.

I was still bummed that Scott Miller never called me for a date, even though it wouldn’t have worked. My parents were far too strict. But it was fun to dream. To walk around holding hands with a boy... that’s what I longed for. I would have loved to brag to Gail Burger that I was dating a freshman!

I still smirked whenever I thought of her. Despite all of Gail’s devious plotting last fall, she never got my brother to ask her out. During the football season I overheard him on the telephone one night talking with Billy, saying that he would never date a girl who lived next door. Too complicated. Hah!

When we stepped onto the Kingston Stadium track Saturday morning, it was easy to tell which one of the Kennedy Cougars was Bonnie Yoder. She had a confidence about her which you couldn’t fake, teammates crowding around like she was a teenage messiah, each of them hoping her talent would rub off if they stood close enough. The thought that later in the day I would be running against the Cedar Rapids senior who was in the finals of the 440 last spring was hard to banish from my mind.

I led off our 440 relay and held my own, Rachel timing her take-off perfectly so we exchanged the baton at full speed. Slowing to a stop I followed her progress as she handed off to Sandra with our team in second place, her exchange with Shelly leading me to believe we had a chance at a victory.

Shelly ran a great anchor but Bonnie Yoder blew her doors off, taking the Cougars from fourth to first in a matter of seconds. Holy shit! I grabbed Rachel and we jogged over to congratulate Shelly at the finish line, each of us giving her a hug. Bonnie Yoder came over and slapped hands with Shelly.

“Nice leg. I didn’t think I was going to catch you.” Shelly smiled at her opponent and then turned to us when Bonnie walked away. There was a smirk on her face.

“I’m not looking forward to the 220.” We all giggled. I wasn’t looking forward to the 440.

I was disappointed with results in the long jump following the relay race, my efforts to hit the board continually frustrated by the gusts of wind in the stadium. This wasn’t my day. It looked like I would have to take out my frustrations on the 440. God, I hope I don’t get embarrassed.

Bonnie and I were the only sprinters who grabbed blocks for the one lap race, the other four athletes employing standing starts. I took a deep breath after I got in position.

“Runners set. BOOM!”

I was in lane two and she was in lane four so it was easy to keep track of her through the first turn, my eyes locked on her back as our speed built. She cut to the left after exiting the first corner, sneaking a peek to over her left shoulder for any competitors, sliding into lane one just in front of me.

I stared at her gold necklace bouncing up and down like water on a hot frypan, closing the gap to one stride as we leaned into the second corner, crossing the midpoint of the turn in the same position with one-hundred-fifty yards of real estate remaining. The race had been easy up to this point but I was rapidly getting tired, thoughts of the long homestretch ahead gnawing at my willpower.

I pulled into lane two as we came out of the final corner for a clean shot into the finish line, but it was all for naught. She took off

with a burst of speed that I didn't even have in the hundred yard dash, pulling away with an ease that astounded me. Bonnie grabbed the win by twenty yards. Wow!

Slowing to a stop after crossing the line, I bent over with hands on knees, wondering if the pain would ever dissipate. Whoa doggie. That hurt. Bonnie walked over and patted me on the back saying, "Nice race." From up in the press box the announcer's words cut into my fatigue.

"Folks. That performance by Yoder broke the facility record. Unofficially she just ran 58.3!" I turned my head without lifting hands off my knees and looked up at the press box. Are you sure?

The second place timer approached and asked my name, saying 1:02.4 as he turned away. For the second time in ten seconds there was an incredulous look on my face. I just PR'ed by three seconds!

We ran 4:12.2 on the mile relay an hour later, breaking our school record by close to two seconds, the bus ride home as raucous as a homecoming pep rally.



The 15th of May our relay team sat in the back of the bus on the way home from the West High district meet, Shelly singing the first words to the new song by Queen that was playing on someone's tape deck.

"I've paid my dues...time after time." Rachel and Sandra joined me on the next lines.

"I've done my sentence but committed no crime..." Twenty-five voices joining in as we all belted out the chorus, seniors holding up the trophy for everyone to see.

"We are the champions, no time for losers. For we are Champions...of the World!"

My anchor in the last event of the day moved us from third to first on the final homestretch and the four extra points were enough

to give us the district title. The meet had started off with a bang, Holly winning the high jump, our smooth passes in the 440 relay enough for second, Shelly and I going 1-2 in the 440, and 2nd and 3rd in the 220, our fivesome scoring most of East High's points.

It was the highlight of my season.

On Sunday morning, one week later, I stared at the cracks in my bedroom ceiling with a heating pad on my stomach, disillusioned with my results at the State Meet. Going into competition on the Drake University track I believed we were shoe-in for the finals in both relays, my dream irrationally leaping to the thought that maybe I might get a medal or ribbon in the 220 and 440. It kept a smile on my face all week.

But a dropped baton on the first exchange of the 440 relay Friday put a damper on my enthusiasm, my preliminary performances in 220 and 440 lackluster, neither one enough to get me into Saturday's final. Every race was a struggle, none of the confidence I had exhibited last week at districts evident today. At least we made it into the finals of the mile relay.

Yet I had a more pressing issue that weekend. My period had started Friday morning.

Ever since the first one last fall they had been like clockwork. Every twenty-eight days. As predictable as death and taxes. Three weeks ago when I turned the calendar over to May and counted up the days, my little "x" landed on the wrong one. May 23rd. The first day of the State Meet. I sighed.

It was a small consolation that the cramps weren't terrible, but my period was still draining – no matter how much Midol I took. I slept Friday night face down on a hot water bottle, waking up at 2:30am to refill it. In the morning when I woke it seemed like I hadn't slept at all.

Even though this was the State Meet, I had as much enthusiasm for the anchor leg on our mile relay as a prisoner does putting her

head in the executioner's guillotine. Bouncing up and down in the back of the exchange zone as I waited for the baton, I took it from Rachel in fifth place and raced around the initial corner, hoping to catch the West High anchor in fourth – the same girl I ran down last weekend for the win.

On the backstretch I closed the gap to one yard on the Trojanette, my hair flying horizontally behind like a windsock, the intensity of my efforts blocking out any thought of fatigue. But with a half lap remaining the acceptance that I was going to fail grew exponentially with each stride, replaced with pain that smacked my body like the blows from a bedroom pillow fight.

The last homestretch felt like a pirate's telescope that kept extending, the final one hundred yards moving no closer despite my best effort. Opponents anchor legs flew by like they were blown along by a gust of wind. I had no response. I was almost walking when I crossed the line.

I failed miserably.

I lay flat on my blue track ten yards past the finish line with a forearm over my brows, tears running down my cheeks in a steady stream, the enormity of my failure crushing me in a vice. I let my teammates down. The girls tried to pull me up, but I resisted their efforts like a ragdoll, too embarrassed to be comforted.

Eighth place. A white ribbon. That's all I had to show for the State Meet.

I rode home on the school bus leaning into dad the entire way, his arm around my shoulders as the tears continued to flow. I suck.

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