

Chapter 16

School started on September 3rd. This was to be a special day for the team. PJ was going to hold his first cross country team registration meeting. He was hoping a few more runners would come out for the team. He hung a handwritten 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper with the teams workout for the day written on it. The existing team was to do an easy 40 minutes of running today.

The meeting was to be held in the school library which was located between the gym and the cafeteria. PJ arrived early and on his way to the library he passed a small record board containing the various school records for cross country and track and field. PJ, as competitive as he was, could not pass up the opportunity to compare his own high school bests to those on the record board. He had a high school 5K best time of 15:50. His best mile time came during his senior year when he ran 4:18 at his state outdoor championship meet. He also ran a 1:56 half mile leg at the Penn Relays in 1978.

PJ's eyes slowly scanned the board from left to right, noting each distance, time, and date as he did so. When his eyes came upon the cross country time they opened wide. There, neatly engraved in the plastic 1 inch by 3 inch slot, was the following.... *14:59 Warinanco 5K Course – James Chobin – 1974.* “Incredible!” he thought to himself. But then again, PJ new every course was different and the Warinanco course had been changed many times over the years. It may have been a short course in 1974.

PJ scanned the board further until he reached another significant mark. But this one made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. It read*880 Yard Run – 1:49.52 – Joel Savage – 1969.* “Holy Crap!” he muttered to himself.

“Checking out the mile record”, PJ heard a voice from behind say. It was Carmine exiting the gym on his way to the library.

“No...the 880 record,” PJ answered as he surveyed the board further looking for the mile record.

“Savage was one heck of a runner”, Carmine answered. “Actually, back in 1969-1971, RC had 7 runners that could all run under 2 minutes for the half mile. In fact, 4 of them could run under 1:54.”

“Really, that’s pretty uncommon to have that many good runners,” PJ said as his eyes locked onto the mile record. He shook his head as he read the inscription *Mile run – 4:11.12 – Joel Savage 1969.*

“Gags was the athletic director and coach back then. He made it a rule that anyone planning on competing in a winter or spring sport had to run cross country. Their cross country teams always had 100 or more boys on them! The competition was fierce, and often, the better athletes would stick with track and field instead of going out for basketball or baseball.”

“So Carmine....”, PJ started, “Do you think we’ll get 100 boys to come out for the team today?”

“Let’s look inside and see how many are here so far.” Carmine replied sarcastically.

As the two approached the library door PJ crossed his fingers. The two coaches stopped and looked into the library. At first it appeared to be empty except for the librarian, Mrs Jung; but then PJ heard a hum from the other side of the door. As he peered through the door and looked around the room he noticed a girl in a motorized wheelchair crossing the library floor. She picked a book on Irish Culture off of a pedestal on top of a display table. Then she turned and said something to someone off to the side of the room. Just then, a boy came from the fiction section and approached the girl. He took the book from

her and read a passage she obviously wanted him to read. When he finished they both started laughing and he bent over and gave her a hug.

“Who’s that,” PJ asked.

“Oh... that’s Kathleen Glackin and her brother Kevin”, Carmine said. “They are great kids...more like best friends than brother and sister.” He added.

“What do you mean?” PJ asked.

“Well...they hang out together, and Kevin really helps Kathleen cope with her illness.”

“What’s wrong with her?” PJ asked.

“She has PLS....It’s like Lou Gerhigs disease, but hits younger people and is not fatal, but very devastating as far as it’s effect of the nervous system.” Carmine said as Kathleen turned and saw the two of them looking through the door at her “They always go to the library at the end of the day until their bus shows up to go home,” he added.

Kathleen waved at Carmine through the window. Carmine waved back, opened the door, and the pair entered.

“How are you, Kathleen?” Carmine said as he approached the strawberry blonde sophomore.

“I’m fine Carmine..and you?” she said with a smile. PJ noticed that her speech pattern was slightly impaired by the PLS. He also noticed her eyes floating up and down checking him out for a moment.

“Kathleen...this is our new cross country coach, PJ Irwin.” Carmine said as he noticed here eyes on PJ as well.

“Nice to meet you,” PJ said as he glanced across the room at her brother.

“Nice to meet ya’, Kathleen said as she started to blush. “Hey Kevin...she hollered across the library to her brother, “ come over here a minute.”

Kevin Glackin was a strong, muscular, kid. As he turned and started towards the trio, PJ noticed the huge friendly smile he had. He was wearing a pair of torn blue jeans and a black POW-MIA tee shirt.

Just then Kevin broke into a comedic stride. He was imitating Monty Python's skit from the Hall of Exotic Strides.

"Perfect!" Carmine laughed as Kevin realized there were visitors.

"I think we found another runner for the team," Carmine added.

"Not me....no way!" Kevin said through a huge smile. "I couldn't run a mile if it was off a cliff!" he scoffed.

"Oh...shush!" laughed Kathleen. "He run's everywhere...to the store...to his friend's house..."

"...to the toilet!" Kevin interrupted and darted towards the hallway where the men's room was located.

"Kevin would be a great runner, but...." Kathleen said as she looked towards the ground.

"But what?" Carmine asked.

"But...me!" she spoke softly with a cracked voice. "I know he won't do it because he feels he needs to be with me after school. I am glad he stays with me....he's my best friend. But...I...I feel like these are his best days and I am robbing them from him."

"I've got an idea," PJ said as he grabbed a chair and sat directly in front of Kathleen.

Kathleen looked up at PJ briefly, and then towards Carmine.

"Kathleen...I could use a team manager to record times during the workouts and races."

"Kevin wouldn't want to do that," she replied. "ever since he had Reye's Syndrome as a kid he has had trouble with detail work...you know...timing, details,...things like that."

PJ smiled broadly and glanced over at Carmine, “I am not talking about him...I want you!”

Kathleen went silent for a few moments as PJ turned towards the library windows overlooking the track and soccer field.

“Ok...I’ll do it. But first, I want to do something about your hair!”

PJ whirled around with his mouth hanging open.

“Coach...If you want to attract kids, you have to look a little more...’with it’. I see a little Ray Liotta in you...he’s just standing behind the Ray Romano in you”.

PJ could only laugh. For the first time in his life he felt speechless. He liked this little girl...she was tough, straight forward, witty, and was probably the first person he had come across (other than Taylor) who could probably take anything he dished out. One hundred students did not show up for the first team registration meeting, however, of the two that did...one of them was special, 100 fold!

“I’ll talk to my brother...don’t worry...he’s in!
Kathleen winked.

Chapter 17

Taylor entered the library at about 5:15 and found PJ and Carmine in deep discussion. PJ had prepared a list of team members. It read as follows

Andrew Cartolano – Sr.

Teddy Dohne – Sr

Mike Kinney – Sr

Rob O’leary – Sr

Vlad Manasee – Sophomore

Matt Shipp – Freshman

Nick Garvey – Freshman

Kevin Glackin – Senior

Kathleen Glackin – Sophomore (Team Manager)

As Taylor approached the table the two coaches were working at, PJ slid the sheet with the names on it in her direction.

“Here’s who we have so far,” he said as he looked at his reflection in a glass case next to his chair. “And I need to do something with my hair!” he added.

Carmine snickered as Taylor glanced up for a moment from the list and observed PJ playing with his locks.

“Right...that’ll be the day you ‘do something’ with your hair.” She said as she rolled her eyes and looked back towards the list.

“Do I really look like Ray Romano?”

Taylor smiled and without looking up from the list she answered, “Kind of...I guess. I see you have met Kathleen.”

PJ snapped the list from her and said, “That’s right...and she thinks I look like Ray Liotta!”

“I know...I just heard her talking to her friends while she was waiting for her ride home,” Taylor chuckled.

PJ looked up at the clock and said, “Wow...it’s getting late...I have to get out for my run.”

As PJ ran across the school’s parking lot to begin his run he passed Cartolano, Dohne, and O’leary as they finished theirs.

“How ya feeling?” PJ said as the boys approached.

“Good,” they shouted almost in unison.

“Any new recruits?” Dohne asked.

“Yep,” PJ said as he turned to continue his run.

“I am late... I’ve got to get my run in before it gets too late”, PJ said hoping to avoid the question of how many recruits.

“How many signed up?” Cartolano asked.

PJ stopped and turned and answered while continuing to walk backwards away from the trio, “ We have a full team...and a team manager!”

“Who’s the manager?” O’leary asked.

“Kathleen ...uh...Glackin, I believe.”

Cartolano’s eyes widened. “Did her brother sign up?”

“It was a packaged deal!” PJ answered with a smile.

“Excellent!” the trio exclaimed.

“Why? Is he good?” PJ asked.

“I don’t know...but he is the funniest kid in the school; this is going to be a fun season.”

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow... Do your sit-ups and push-ups.” PJ said and then sped off towards Warinanco Park to get in a 12 miler.

The run over to the park from the school is about 1.5 miles. Once at the park, PJ had a selection of trails and roadways that he could run. Of course, he had the cross country course he could run on at the park, as well.

As PJ exited the school parking lot he crossed over a wooden foot bridge and turned right onto 9th avenue in Rozelle. He darted across the street so that he could run against traffic. All smart runners do this because it lets them see the car, and maybe even get a good description of it, before it runs them over. PJ ran past a few kids selling lemonade as he made a left onto Locust Street and started to ascend a small hill leading up to 5th Avenue. Almost without thinking, PJ accelerated up the hill. *Never waste a hill* he thought as he increased his leg turnover. PJ’s high school coach used to drive this into his head. He had attended Norris Hills High School and was

coached by the legendary Jim O'Leary. O'Leary came from a great family of runners; himself, a 4 minute miler. He had coached numerous teams, including PJ's, to NJ state cross country titles. O'leary had a second saying that stuck with PJ throughout the years. *Get out in front of the garbage!*..he would tell his runners in the pre-race pep talks. PJ loved this expression...even today, 25 years later, it still made him smile as he thought about it.

PJ made a right onto 5th Avenue and started heading north towards the park. The street was lined with beautiful Victorian homes, most built around the turn of the century. PJ's favorite was a grey one with the name *Wischasen* on the mailbox. It had a large oak tree in the front yard and the grounds were impeccably landscaped. PJ would sometimes run across the end of the lawn because the grass was so plush that the cushioning would help his legs feel better. Today, however, he had to stay on the sidewalk because new Andersen windows were being installed at the house and the installers had lined up the windows on the lawn bordering the sidewalk.

As PJ ran past the windows he took the opportunity to check out his form. While he checked out his arm carry and stride, he thought he saw someone running on the other side of the street. Quickly, he turned and looked across the street, but, there was only a small child on a bicycle watching him run past.

He made it to the park in 9 minutes and 20 seconds...exactly the pace he wanted to be running. This equated to somewhere around 6:10 per mile. As he entered the park he decided to run the trail that went around the outer perimeter. A few moments later PJ noticed a group of runners about 150 meters in front of him. They appeared to be college age runners, perhaps, he wasn't quite sure. But it didn't matter...because tonight...they were dinner.

PJ was a competitor...and whenever he came upon a group such as this, something came over him. That voice in his head would challenge him. At first it would be simply to catch them. If they tried to go with PJ, well then the voice would get downright nasty. Sometimes it would tell PJ to throw in surges to “test their fortitude”. On other days, just a gradual acceleration until the victims gave in. One time, while on a business trip in Carlsbad, California, PJ was running with a guy who claimed to be an ultramarathoner. PJ decided to simply keep running until the guy stopped. The ultra runner ran 41 miles that day...PJ, 43!

Surges on hills could be the flavor of the day today, PJ thought as he began his chase after this group of seven runners. At 6:10 pace I should be able to make up the distance in about a mile. Let's see...that means I'll pass them just as we hit the uphill at the Linden Road entrance to the Park. Perfect...surges on hills...an uphill spanking...you know....when I visualize...it is almost frightening!

PJ was feeling good today. His steps were light and efficient; his breathing unlabored. He loved days like this...they were the reward for all those days of running sick, in bad weather, at midnight. Days like today made the sacrifices worthwhile.

As PJ approached the skating rink he checked his watch and ‘did the math’. Most distance runners develop a knack for math. Especially marathoners...they check their watches as they pass the mile marks and then ‘do the math’ to figure out their pace and projected finishing times. PJ’s pace was holding at 6:10. He still felt great but it didn’t look like he was catching the group of seven runners in front of him. It was hard to tell with all the turns between him and them, he would know better in a couple of minutes because he looked at his watch when

they passed the large evergreen tree near the skating rink. He passed some 26 seconds later.

PJ checked his watch again as the group passed the foul pole on the softball field. He would check the watch again when he passed the pole himself. *Let's see he thought to himself...if they are your typical college jocks I should close the gap to ...say...15 seconds by the time I get to the pole. Let's see.* PJ approached the pole and looked down at his watch....*26 seconds...shit...I didn't gain anything on them. These guys are moving pretty good. Great...let me shift gears...*he thought to himself.

PJ gradually picked up the pace as he passed the Linden Road entrance to the Park.

PJ continued to soar around the perimeter of the park. He had checked his watch at Linden Road and then checked it again at the public pool knowing the distance between the two was 800 meters. This was a well known place to do 800 meter repeats. Two minutes and fifty seconds was the elapsed time. PJ was now running at a 5:40 mile pace. *I'm flying* he thought to himself as he assessed his form. *Now...lets get back to the job at hand* he added as he noticed the pack of 7 passing the water fountain by the park ranger station. PJ glanced at his watch again and continued to push towards the water fountain. *24...25...26! Damn...no ground gained...not an inch!* PJ thought as he double-checked his watch. *These guys are good!....Who are they?* he wondered. *Can they keep it up? Can I catch them? Who ?*

On the next lap around the park PJ dropped below 5:20 pace and gained a little, but only for a short time. When he neared the runners he noticed how they glided effortlessly through the rolling hills of the park. Their strides were almost perfectly aligned...and one other thing...they changed leads in a very orderly way. They shared the lead with each other...they weren't racing each

other...they were sharing the lead...encouraging the trailing runner to move up and take the lead. And...they never looked back! To them, PJ didn't even exist. Or so he thought.

By the 4th loop around the park, PJ had fallen another 30 seconds back. He wasn't going to catch them. For a moment he considered running the opposite way...just so that he could find out who they were. But he had discipline...and completing the run was more important to him. So, at the end of the 4th lap, PJ exited the park onto 3rd Avenue and headed back to the school. Along the way he tapered off on the pace and focused on recovering...relaxing. *I hope they are their tomorrow*, he thought to himself. *I'd like another crack at them...Hell! I'd like to train with them!* he thought as the school came into view.

Chapter 18

The next two days were distance days for the runners. Kevin Glackin showed up as planned and suffered through the latter parts of the distance runs...but finished them. Kathleen cheered him on each day and he gratefully acknowledged her on each occasion. Kathleen recorded the boys splits and reviewed them with the team at the end of each practice. It was nice how they listened without goofing off as she went through the information.

"Tomorrow is Saturday." PJ said to the group of runners as they gathered near the cross country starting line to do sit ups and push ups.

"You are all doing very well, but at some point we have to go anaerobic. We are going to do some harder interval work tomorrow."

“Oh, joy of joys!” Dohne murmured making Vladimere snicker.

“Vlad...Did you want to say something?” PJ asked as he put the kid on the spot.

“No...it’s just that Ted likes to sleep in on Saturday mornings,” Vlad answered.

“Dohne...we’ll wait for you,” PJ teased.

“Vlad’s the one who will be late,” Dohne quipped. “Have you ever watched him get dressed after practice?” he added?

Nobody said anything...and then Cartolano opened his mouth.

“You’re the only one that watches people get dressed after practice,” he joked as he jumped to his feet.

“I’m gonna kick your....” Dohne said as he jumped up and took off after Cartolano.

PJ and the others laughed as he watched the two dash in and out of the wooded area bordering the course. Cartolano had the best of Dohne...until he had to stop. Then Dohne took his revenge. He tackled Cartolano and in one quick move flipped him onto his back and straddled his body...sitting on him.

“Pink Belly” Dohne yelled as he pulled up on Cartolano’s shirt. Over the course of the next minute or so Dohne slapped repeatedly on Cartolano’s stomach until the skin glowed red! When finished...Dohne helped Andrew to his feet and they both laughed while they walked back to the group.

“Tomorrow...9:00 AM...we meet at the track..!” PJ added as he turned towards his car. He was about to begin his own workout and he wondered if he would have anyone to run with. As he changed into his training flats, he debated whether to run a tempo run or long intervals this evening. Either way, he would try to reach about 85% of his maximum heart rate. Running at this rate

would boost the oxygen delivery to the muscles. He liked to think of training at this pace as “oxygen loading” which referred to the increase in the ability to absorb oxygen into the blood. The more oxygen in the blood, the better the krebs cycle and the more ATP (the basic unit of energy used to fuel the body) produced.

As he leaned against his car and stretched his achilles, he closed his eyes and visualized his muscles becoming loose and relaxed. He was a great believer in visualization, a loose form of self hypnosis.

As PJ opened his eyes, his vision was slightly blurred. As it cleared, he noticed a group of runners out on the cross country course. As they neared the parking lot he sensed they were looking directly at him. When they reached the road separating the track from the course, they turned right and headed for the starting line of the course. They slowed for a moment and then one of them waved towards PJ.

PJ waved back and took off in a brisk jog towards them. He was feeling loose, he felt the adrenaline beginning to flow. It was *Hammer Time*, although they didn't know it!

“Hi, do you mind if I run with you?”, PJ said as he approached the group.

“No, not at all!” replied the closest runner. “We thought you might want to based on the way you were chasing us last night!” he added with a grin. “My name is Dan, and these are my running buddies,” he added as he extended his hand.

PJ reached out and shook Dan's hand. He also, noticed that Dan was wearing a pair of vintage Nike LDV 1000's. These shoes were one of the first pair of waffle soled shoes ever produced by Nike. They had a wedge shaped heel. There was a recent resurgence in retro shoes. People were paying top dollar for shoes that were

once the state of the art in the 70's. PJ thought this was silly because the materials had improved so much since then. As PJ shook hands with the rest of the group, he noticed they were all wearing retro shoes.

"Do you like my Arthur Lydiard's?" one of the runner's asked?

PJ's eyes widened as he looked down at the runner's shoes. He had heard there was a Lydiard brand at one time, but had never seen a pair. They seemed to be very lightweight.

"Very nice," PJ said as he started to jog and the group joined in.

"What do you plan on running tonight, coach?" Dan asked.

"I was going to do an interval workout...800 meter repeats in about 2:25 – 2:30 each," PJ answered. "But I am willing do whatever you guys want to do if 800's are too much", he added.

"We were thinking of 1200's going through the 800 in 2:25", Dan said while some of the others behind him grinned and nodded their heads.

PJ knew what was going on here. He was just one-upped. They were going to run 50% farther on each interval and at the same pace a PJ. PJ knew he could do this workout, but for how long.

"I like to keep my recoveries short...around 2 minutes!" PJ quipped.

"We usually stick to 60-90 seconds," came a voice from the back of the pack. PJ turned to see who it was, and he noticed that all seven of the runners were grinning at him. And they had that look...that confident, smug look. They would definitely lose at poker, because their look didn't disguise anything. They were holding a great hand and they were about to deal him one hell of a workout.

“Well...from the looks on your faces,” PJ started, “...I can see this is going to be an interesting workout.”

“Painful, too,” he added as he broke into the first 1200 meter interval.

Approximately 1/3 of the way into the first interval, two of the runners took the lead, running stride for stride, like machines. Their arms swung ever so slightly front and back. They floated along effortlessly, as did the other five. PJ focused on his own form. He didn't want to exhibit any weakness or flaw. Toward the end of the first interval he struggled a little with controlling his breathing. He did not want to be panting when he finished.

“Three minutes and 43 seconds”, Dan said as he crossed line stride for stride with PJ.

PJ broke into a jog and started to collect himself in preparation for the next interval. *There is no way I can do more than 5 of these at this pace and just a 90 second recovery!* he thought to himself. *I wonder how many they plan on doing?*

“One down and nine to go,” Dan said as PJ turned to look at him. Dan hi-fived the runner next to him as they regrouped during the jog.

“You take the next one, Dave”, Dan said to the runner next to him while wiping his sweat in the faded tee shirt he was wearing. The front of the shirt bore a picture of a Snickers Bar. The shirt was obviously well worn.

“Ok,” Dave replied as he glanced over at Dan. “Hey...you're not blowing your nose in your favorite shirt...are you?” he added.

“Nope, just got some sweat in my eyes...and I think it's not my own,” Dan replied with a grin.

“Dan's a Snickers Bar fanatic,” Dave said as he moved to the other side of PJ. “I've seen him take in 3-4 at a time.”

“I'm partial to Milky Ways,” PJ added.

Dan turned briefly to face PJ and smiled. “Milky Ways are ok...but Snickers ...mmmm...mmm... there just isn’t anything better.

As they prepared to start the next 1200 meter interval, Dan reminded the group of runners to try to stay together and to help each other out. “We will each lead one interval until the last one, and then its every man for himself!” Dan said as he turned to face the start of the next interval.

“Take it Dave”, Dan said as he started to run and simultaneously pressed the start button on his watch.

PJ took off, also, and decided to run this one at the back of the pack.

“Stay with it coach,” came a voice from the far end of the group. PJ glanced over in the direction from which the words of encouragement came. There, he noticed the shortest runner of the bunch. He had dirty blond hair and wore a Villanova University shirt. He was muscular, built like a “V”, and had perfect form. He looked like a running machine. Without turning his head, his eyes looked over towards PJ and then refocused in front of him again.

Dave, meanwhile, lead the trio around the 600 meter pole and downhill towards the “flower garden”, an area in the park in which an octagon shaped garden existed. It was bordered by protective evergreen shrubs.

“Stay with me!” Dave commanded as he entered the last 400 meters of the interval. His last 400 meters were uphill from the “rose garden” and around the back of another famous landmark know as “the Alamo”. The Alamo was an elevated garden in the middle of the park that was bordered by a large cement wall. There were steps on either end that allowed access to the interior of the fort like structure. During cross country season, hoards of race fans would battle for a prime position

inside Alamo. From there, nearly the entire race could be observed with very little obstruction. The 1200 meter and 4000 meter marks of the high school cross country course were directly in front of the Alamo.

As the group neared the Alamo, PJ noticed something. They were pulling together. The runners in the back pushed a little harder and they seemed to pack tighter together.

“That’s the way!” Dave said as he decelerated to a jog.

“Nice run coach”, Dan said as he hi-fived the muscular kid that had urged PJ on in the middle of the interval.

“Thanks,” PJ said as he tried to regain his breath. He extended his hand to the kid that urged him on, and said “Thanks for pushing me.”

“No problem,” came the reply. “My name is Rob O’Mally.”

“My name is PJ Irwin,” PJ said as he shook his hand. At that point, the others joined in the greetings.

“Hi coach, my name is Evan Brand,” came an introduction from an unassuming kid with shoulder length long dark hair.

“And I’m Mark...” came a voice from behind. “Mark Hills”.

“Nice to meet you, Mark” PJ replied as he turned and extended his hand towards the blond haired kid in the Adidas shirt that paced the last interval.

“David Santos”, came the response.

“Hi David...nice job pacing that last one,” PJ answered.

“My pleasure”, Dave answered with a grin.

“My name is Bill Bahsman,” came a voice from behind PJ. PJ whirled around to see a lanky kid with platinum blonde hair. PJ glanced downward and noticed the kid was wearing a Cho-Pat strap on each leg just

below the knee cap. PJ knew that these straps help the kneecap move in the appropriate groove or alignment.

“The chicks love them!” came the response from Bahsman as he observed PJ studying the straps.

PJ smiled as he looked past Bahsman towards the only runner of the seven that he had not met, yet.

“His name is Pete,” Dan said under his breath to PJ. “He is very focused...almost to a flaw,” he added.

PJ observed as Pete jogged around in place. He was shaking his arms out trying to relax them and he had his eyes closed. There was something familiar about this kid, but PJ just could not pinpoint it.

“Pete...are you up for this one?” Dan asked as he checked his watch. “We go off in 30 seconds,” he added.

Pete looked at Dan and PJ and nodded; then he went back to his routine of jogging in place.

As the final 30 seconds of the rest period came to an end, Pete jogged towards the line and the other 6 runners rallied around him with an unusual sense of urgency. Within no time, PJ knew why. As PJ desperately tried to stay with the pack, the new leader, Pete, was redefining the workout. They went past the 400 meter mark in 69 seconds and rounded the 600 meter pole in 1 minute 44 seconds. As they raced past the “flower garden”, PJ noticed how strong the group looked. Not only were they moving, but they were all stride for stride, closely packed, and showing no sign of slowing. They raced up the final hill by the Alamo and finished in a time of 3 minutes 27 seconds! They had just run sub 4:40 mile pace for their third 1200 meter interval.

As PJ reached the end of the interval, Dan held out his hand and hi fived him.

“Nice running coach”, Dan said.

It felt awkward being called “coach” by these guys. They were far superior to him, and also, PJ never told them he was a coach.

“Thanks,” PJ gasped. He could no longer hide it. He was tired.

“We should have warned you...Pete likes to train at 4:40 mile pace,” Dan explained. “His goal is to run a 5K at this pace.”

PJ stood there, bent over, with his hands on his knees and did the math in his head as he fought to recover. *A 4:40 mile pace would result in a 14:20 5K time!* PJ grimaced as he completed the thought.

PJ struggled through the remainder of the workout and was impressed by how these guys pushed and encouraged each other. The tightly packed finish at the end of each 1200 meter interval was awe-inspiring to PJ.

As PJ warmed down with the bunch they jogged together towards PJ’s car. PJ stopped at the car and grabbed his sweat pants from off of the hood.

“Thanks for working out with me,” PJ said as he stepped into the pants.

“Yeah thanks,” came the reply from the group as they turned to walk away. Just then, Pete turned back towards PJ and asked “Same time tomorrow, coach?”

PJ laughed and said, “Yeah...that sounds like a plan.”

PJ finished dressing as the seven runners jogged out of the park onto West Jersey Street.

PJ hopped in the car and drove to the same exit and made a left onto West Jersey Street. As he drove towards downtown Rozelle, he realized that he must have driven right past the group of runners and not noticed them. Either that, or they must have lived in the apartment complex bordering the park at the exit onto West Jersey Street.

PJ arrived home about 30 minutes later. As he drove up the driveway he noticed Taylor playing with David and Nike in the front yard. Taylor waved and turned to throw a Frisbee for Nike to catch. Nike, on the other hand, took off and ran straight towards PJ. As PJ stepped out of the car, Nike jumped up and greeted him by putting his two front paws on PJ's shoulder.

"Down Nike," PJ shouted through intermittent laughter.

"Daddy, watch how fast I can run," exclaimed David from the other side of the yard.

David ran briskly from the front porch to the broken down stable that bordered the yard.

"Great job," PJ yelled as David came to a stop.

"How was practice?" Taylor asked.

"They did an easy distance run today. They are looking a little stronger, but we have a ways to go," PJ replied.

"They go anaerobic tomorrow!" he added.

"Speedwork...gotta love it," Taylor said with a grin as she picked up a set of roller skates from the lawn and headed in to get dinner on the table.

"That's right!" PJ chuckled as he turned to follow Taylor inside. Taylor was a natural athlete and learned quickly. She ran a few races in her early 20's, but became a purely recreational runner in her latter years. When it came to training, she was smart and learned fast. On many a night she would sit down and graph PJ's workout log, resting heart rates, and race times. She often recommended adjustments to PJ's training and he learned to follow her advice. When PJ purchased an intermittent altitude training unit, it was Taylor that figured out how to use it.

Dinner consisted of mashed potatoes, chicken, and brussel sprouts, PJ's favorite. After dinner, PJ read the

mail and then sat down and watched a rerun of *21 Jump Street* on TV. Taylor was a huge Johnny Depp fan. PJ nodded out early and wound up sleeping on the couch most of the night.

Chapter 19

PJ stopped at the Village Bakery before practice for a hard roll and coffee. The Village Bakery was famous for the hard rolls produced using their secret baking process. As PJ took his first bite of the roll, there came a voice from behind.

“I bet you can’t eat just one!” said Augie Bernstein, the proprietor. Augie was proud of the business he inherited from his mother. When Augie was in high school, he played football on the same team as a kid named Rosie Greer. Rosie went on to become a famous football player, Augie followed his mother’s wishes and took over the bakery. He was a good boy...an even better man! He supported the local charities and schools and never had a harsh word for anyone.

“I hear you are coaching the cross country team at RC this year,” Augie added.

“Yes...it’s just something temporary until I find a real job,” PJ added.

Augie peered sternly over his glasses and replied, “That is a real job! Kids need nurturing more than ever nowadays...there are traps everywhere.”

“I know...you are right...it is a tremendous responsibility,” PJ countered in an effort to halt the conversation at that point. He didn’t feel like having to justify himself. He was asked to coach since he had the time; and he agreed to one season. By January, he’d be an engineer again. There were enough juveniles to last a

lifetime in industry, he didn't need to increase the agony by getting into coaching kids.

"Darn right it is," Augie added as he handed PJ a photo album full of pictures of him and Rosie Greer playing on their high school team. "Notice how Rosie is missing his blocks, but I am making every one of mine," Augie said proudly.

PJ fumbled through the pages while sipping his coffee. Damned if he wasn't right, he was outperforming the great Rosie Greer in every photo.

"But mom needed me to take over the bakey...so here I am!" Augie half bragged, half lamented. PJ noticed a sadness in Augie's comment. He watched as the little old man cleaned the top of one of the pastry counters.

PJ turned and headed towards the exit.

"I find it thrilling to take dough and make my creations out of it," Augie said. "I love making something out of nothing...it's a thrill!"

"Have a nice day," PJ said with a smile as he opened the door.

Augie peered briefly over his glasses and then returned to cleaning the bakery counters.

When PJ arrived at the track the entire team was already there stretching and talking about the party they had been to the night before.

"I made it on time," Vlad called out to PJ as he approached.

"You didn't sleep here, did you?" PJ replied jokingly.

"Nope, I got up early, ate a light breakfast, and here I am." Vlad answered back.

"Are you kidding?!!" came a voice from behind Vlad. It was Teddy Dohne.

"Your mom drove up, went around to your side of the car, opened the door, and dragged your ass out of the

car!” Dohne laughed. “You didn’t wake up until you were halfway across the parking lot!” he added.

“Hey...Dohne....I’m going to....” Vlad said as he grabbed Dohne into a headlock.

“Alright guys....it’s too early for this,” PJ said as he motioned the team towards the track. Together they broke into an easy jog and PJ went to work describing the goals for today.

“Guys...today we are going to do 800 meter repeats. I want to start out at 3 minutes and work the time down to 2:20,” he explained. “You will have a 2 minute recovery between each one. I want you to jog it, not walk it.” He added.

“How many 800’s will we be doing,” asked Cartolano.

“Eight,” answered PJ as he broke into a brief “stride out” to see how his legs felt.

As the group jogged a few more laps on the track, PJ took in bits and pieces of the varied conversations that were taking place. Garvey and Shipp were discussing their latest video game scores...each one accusing the other of lying. Dohne, Kinney, and O’leary were debating how well the Giants were going to do this year. Kevin Glackin was in the middle of a Monty Python routine for the benefit of Vlad Manasee.

Andrew Cartolano, unlike the others, was quietly running right next to PJ. As they circled the track PJ noticed Cartolano shaking out his arms every once in a while. He appeared to be really focused on the job at hand...loosening up. PJ thought about the workout he experienced the night before with the runners he had met. He couldn’t help but be in awe at how they ran as a pack before, during, and after the workout. He loved how they encouraged each other and brought out the best in each other as they ran the intervals...each one getting harder and harder. He remembered how Dan, the runner

wearing the vintage Snickers Bar tee shirt rallied the runners and had kind encouraging words for each one of them after every interval. They were truly a tight bunch, a team by every definition.

PJ stopped and turned around to view “his” team as they completed their jog. PJ’s blood began to boil as he saw Shipp, Manasee, and Garvey walking around the track a half lap back. Also, there directly in front of him was O’leary and Dohne mocking Kinney’s haircut. You could see it was bothering Kinney, but he tried not to let it show. Cartolano and Glackin were already sitting on the ground stretching when PJ’s glance reached their location.

PJ sighed to himself as he started to write the runners names on his clipboard. He carefully made eight columns next to the names so that he could record their interval times. *These guys are not a team, PJ thought to himself. I need a kid like the runner Dan I met last night, to set the tone for the others; be an example* he thought. PJ glanced out at the track and saw Shipp, Manasee, and Garvey continuing to walk to the finish. This was beginning to annoy PJ. *Who am I kidding...I just need to find a real job. These kids hearts will never be in it. They simply aren’t the caliber of the guys I ran with last night. They never will be!* He lamented.

“Does anyone want to lead the stretches today?” PJ asked. In return, he was answered with 8 blank stares (a few accompanied with eyes rolling back into their heads, and at least one muffled laugh.

“Very well then, I’ll lead ‘em”, PJ said impatiently. In no time he guided the boys through a series of stretches designed to loosen up their legs, arms, and backs so that they would be less likely to hurt themselves during the workout. A few of the stretches resulted in wining and groaning, however, PJ simply ignored it and moved on.

Cartolano and Glackin seemed to be the most serious of the bunch. They stretched nearly in unison and didn't speak a word. They seemed focused....or maybe they were just daydreaming about other things.

"Ok guys...let's get to the starting line," PJ said to the bunch. Shipp, Vlad, and Garvey were slow getting to the line and as the others stood there waiting for them. PJ glanced up from his clip board towards the three and noticed their slow stroll towards the starting line and then glanced towards the kids on the line.

"Ok guys...ready...go," PJ rushed his starting commands to accentuate the lateness of the trio.

It was a chaotic start to the workout. Garvey and Shipp took off from their locations on the infield as they tried frantically to catch the others. Manasee, on the other hand, widened his eyes and approached the coach and exclaimed, "I wasn't ready!"

PJ sternly looked back and said, "That's OK...just join the rest of the team when you are."

Manasee seemed confused. He expected to be told to "catch the others"...or "start now"...or something;...but instead, he was basically told to do whatever he wanted. This caught him off guard and he struggled with the freedom to decide. He could run now and simply trail the pack; or, he could wait until they finished a lap, and then join them. Or he could wait a little longer and start his workout with the second 800 meter interval.

PJ observed as Manasee watched the others run. PJ noticed how Manasee would look at PJ every once in a while, almost as if he was waiting for PJ to tell him what to do.

PJ restrained himself from saying anything to Manasee.

Instead, he studied the boys as they circled the track and prepared to write down their 400 meter splits. The

boys were very spread out with Cartolano and Dohne leading the pack.

As the lead runners completed their first lap, PJ yelled out the times. “Ninety three, ninety four, ninety six.” He yelled out. “Pick it up,” he added as he watched the 60 meter long string of runners round the first turn of the second lap.

Just then he noticed that Cartolano glanced backward towards Dohne and Glackin. This was immediately followed with a surge by the two trailing runners until all three were side by side going into the last turn. As they approached the finish lined PJ observed the times...3:01 flat for the first three runners. The remaining 4 crossed the line in 3:06 to 3:12.

As they crossed the line PJ assessed how they looked. None of the boys appeared particularly tired. This was good because they still had seven more intervals to go.

“Let’s jog the recovery...not walk it,” PJ shouted to the kids. The boys broke into a jog, and Manasee joined them in preparation for the next interval.

“Wow...I am not even tired,” Manasee joked with the others as they jogged their recovery. Garvey and Shipp looked in his direction but didn’t say anything.

As they approached the start of their second interval PJ reminded the group that he wanted to see negative splits with each 800 meter interval being faster than the previous one.

“Vlad...why don’t you take this one since you bailed on the first one,” O’leary said tersely.

Vlad looked at the rest of the runners as they all stared back at him. “Sure...I’ll take it,” he said, “I just hope you chumps can stay with me!” he added as he looked over at PJ.

“Let’s get this party started,” he said as he motioned towards PJ to start the next interval.

“Okay....go,” PJ said and Vlad led the runners into the first turn. The mood during this interval was in sharp contrast to the first. All eight of the runners went through the first 200 meters in 33 seconds and the 400 meters in 68. PJ watched as the group raced wrecklessly around the track; slowing tremendously during the second lap, tying up because of the excessively quick first 200 meters. He grimaced as he watched them struggle during the last 100 meters with their form falling completely apart. The came across the line, not as a pack, but more resembling a long line of zombies, collapsing to their knees as they finished to the interval. Vlad, Cartolano, and Dohne crossed the line in 2:37. The rest of the group was strung out crossing between 2:40 and 3:01. They were all visibly tired. O’leary, Manasee, Shipp, and Garvey were all bent over with their hands on their knees as they tried to catch their breath.

“Guys...don’t bend over and put your hands on your knees,” PJ shouted. “It makes you look tired, weak. Being a competitor means not revealing your weakness, not showing the competition you are tired. This is what I want others to notice about our team...that we seem to be invincible!”

The boys straightened up and started to walk.

“Com’on guys...let’s jog,” said Cartolano. PJ glanced over towards Andrew as he broke into a jog. Dohne, O’leary, and Kinney, the upper classmen on the team immediately joined Cartolano. In a few moments, the entire team was jogging their recovery. They weren’t tightly packed, but they were jogging.

As they approached the starting line, PJ reminded them that each interval had to be faster than the previous. He also pointed out that they didn’t run negative splits on the last one. Their first lap was simply too fast. Everyone looked at Vlad .

“Hey,,,I’m sorry guys...I forgot what our instructions were,” Vlad said.

“Teddy...you up for this one?” Cartolano asked.

“Sure thing boss,” came the reply from Teddy Dohne as he moved towards the starting line.

“Ok guys...we run this like a pack, got it...Teddy leads,” Cartolano instructed.

The team nodded almost in unison.

“I’m targeting 2:50-:255,” Dohne said.

“Ok...10 seconds and then we start,” PJ said as he reset his watch. PJ surveyed the scene as the boys readied themselves for the start of the 3rd interval. It was quiet, and the second row of runners were lining up noticeably closer to the first row this time. Cartolano joined the underclassmen, Garvey, Shipp, and Manasee in the second row this time.

“Ready...Go!” came the commands from PJ and the team took off. Dohne broke to the front and the pack fell in just off his shoulder and behind him. As they entered the first turn, O’leary stumbled as his foot landed on the crease where the grass infield met the track. Almost immediately, Kevin Glackin reached out and grabbed O’leary’s arm to keep him from falling. O’leary recovered, nodded towards Glackin and the pack pushed on.

Dohne brought them through the first lap in 84 seconds. “Nice job...84 seconds.” PJ yelled toward the tightly packed group. As they went into the third turn, PJ noticed Garvey and Shipp falling off pace a little. Cartolano was right behind them as the three fell about 5 yards behind the lead group. As they entered the back straightaway, Cartolano moved up alongside Shipp and Garvey. He reached his hand out and patted Garvey on the back,

“Go for another gear,” Cartolano said to Garvey and Shipp. PJ watched as the trio gradually gained on the lead pack of runners. As they entered the last straightaway, PJ watched as the runners ran towards him. With about 70 meters to go, PJ’s eyes widened as he saw Garvey, Shipp, Manasee, and Cartolano move outside and become even with the lead 4 runners. They were running eight abreast, not struggling, and their form looked good. They seemed to have this one under control.

“Two fourty eight,” PJ shouted as they crossed the line in unison.

A few moments later they were jogging. PJ watched as Cartolano high fived Garvey and Shipp. Cartolano reminded him of the runner he met the previous evening, Dan. He was respected by the kids around him, he had leadership qualities.

PJ remembered his first conversation with Andrew when the boy revealed that he heard voices when he raced in grammar school. He remembered how he described that feeling of “letting himself (the voice) down” when he gave in and folded during races. It was obvious that Andrew was becoming a team leader.

As practice continued, the pack became tighter and tighter. PJ dropped the total number of intervals to six simply too fast a couple of times. He didn’t want to run them into the ground with speed work at this point in the season. At the end of the 6th interval, he told the bunch to do an easy 2 mile warm down around the park.

PJ watched as they immediately broke into a jog and headed towards the entrance to the trail leading around the park. Suddenly, they slowed and turned towards the track.

“You coming, Vlad?” Cartolano yelled to Manasee who was still standing on the track.

PJ whirled around to see Mannasee standing on the starting line, slightly crouched, with his head down, as if he was getting ready for another 800.

“Well coach...how much more recovery do I have?” Vlad asked without facing PJ.

“You’re done Vlad, It’s time for the warm down,” PJ answered as he approached the boy.

Vlad’s head turned slowly as he remained poised to start another interval. “I’ve only done five, coach. I’ve got one more to do.”

PJ stared at Vlad and for the first time noticed an intensity in his eyes. Vlad stared for a moment and then added, “Got your watch ready?”

PJ quickly grabbed for his watch as Vlad turned his head and peered into the first turn.

“Ok Vlad,” PJ said as he fumbled with the reset button. Vlad glanced downward towards the ground for a moment and then blessed himself.

“Ready....go,” PJ shouted.

As Vlad took off into the turn the rest of the team jogged to various locations around the perimeter of the track.

“No prisoners...Vlad...Take no prisoners!” shouted Kinney.

“Go Yift”, shouted Cartolano as Vlad passes the 200 in 35 seconds.

“Go Yift?” asked PJ as Cartolano laughed and looked at him.

“Yeah...Myrus Yifter...Vlad’s father said he raced against him a long time ago. Yifter was an great African distance runner.”

“Yeah...I remember seeing him run,” PJ chuckled as he grabbed for his watch.

“Seventy seconds,” PJ shouted as Vlad went through the 400 meters.

“His dad thinks Vlad has Yifter’s form”, Cartolano added.

PJ studied the lone runner as he raced past his cheering teammates. He had a nice, quick stride. And then PJ noticed the similarity. He held his arms a little on the high side and his singlet was a little too large causing it to slide off his shoulder. This was a Yifter trademark.

“You know...no one was really sure how old Yifter was,” PJ said to Cartolano.

Cartolano turned and replied, “ Well...coach, we’re not really sure how old Vlad is either!”

Vladimere came through the 600 meter mark in 1 minute and 45 seconds. As he entered into the final turn his leg turnover seemed to quicken. PJ wondered how much he had left. His teammates, now lining the final straightway, cheered wildly.

“Run you SOB”, shouted Teddy Dohne as Vlad bore down with 50 meters to go.

“Two fifteen, two sixteen, two seventeen!” shouted PJ as Vlad crossed the line.

PJ and the team watched as Vlad decelerated. He was gasping and in obvious pain. He stopped, staggered a few feet, then started to bend over to put his hands on his knees and catch his breath.

Come on Vlad...Don’t stop...don’t bend over...don’t show the weakness... PJ thought to himself.

Vlad continued to slowly move forward. He coughed and spit...and then it happened. He straightened up and broke into a slow jog.

Yes! PJ thought to himself.

Vlad jogged to the end of the straightaway as he regained his composure. He turned and jogged back towards PJ and the rest of the team.

“Piece of cake!” he said as he approached the group.

“Two miles...easy...now,” PJ said as he recorded Vlad’s time on his clipboard.

As the group strode off into the trails, PJ made his way back to his car. The team’s first dual meet was only 10 days away. It was a scrimmage against Union Catholic Academy, a school from the next town over. They were 4th in the county the previous year, and had most of their runners returning. He made a quick phone call to the other school’s coach to confirm the meet, and then started to stretch in preparation for his own workout; which would begin after the boys went home.