

## Chapter 15

The next week of practice went fairly smoothly. Each day PJ would show up and meet the group and take them through a ritual of stretching followed by running and finishing with stride outs. He didn't push them through any speed work, just focused on distance.

PJ continued to run his own workouts later in the evening after the team dispersed. PJ's workouts were laid out in advance. He was training for the USATF Open 10,000 meter XC championship in early December. He was determined to try to take out Sayed.

Sayed was known for surging multiple times during a race. In addition, he had a good kick. PJ's workouts were designed to help him withstand the surging. He wasn't worried about the kick...he knew he could kick, as well. On one occasion he had entered a road race at Swartswood State park where he almost outkicked one of the greatest kickers of all times, Marcello O'Sullivan, the Irish-Italian runner who ran over 100 sub 4 minute miles in his career. It was a hot August day and the Bears Running Club of North Jersey were holding their annual "Christmas in August – 5K". Each year this race was held to raise money for their youth running program known as the Stillwater Bears. It was held during the week that the Bears held their youth running camp. The kids attending the camp would gather and work the evening race. And to their delight, each year, Marcello would come and win the race and sign autographs and mingle with the young runners. Gurn and Laura Gordan, the race organizers always did a great job of attracting talent to their events. One of the local stars they attracted each year was a runner named Gary Rosencrantz. Each year Rosencrantz ran a great race, but only placed second.

Gary managed a number of running stores throughout NJ known as “The Running Corps”. He was very generous to the club. Rosencrantz had great speed and was a good kicker himself, but each year Marcello would distance himself from Rosencrantz during the first two miles of the race, leaving Rosencrantz no reason to kick. But this particular year was different. Rosencrantz challenged Marcello to run with him until the last quarter mile of the race and then see who had the better kick. Marcello, the true competitor he was, agreed.

Watching this challenge unfold were two other competitors. One was the unknown, PJ Irwin, a runner who had recently moved to the area. The other, was the national 10 mile champion, Mike Tikitok, who was to be the honorable starter for the event.

Tikitok was one of the greatest high school runners in NJ history. Every year he would give a talk on what it was like to be an elite high school runner in NJ. He would tell the kids how he got thrown off the team a number of times because he did not run the slow workouts his coach was telling him to do. He knew he had to run harder to be great... and it worked. The kids loved Tikitok because he, in fact, was just a big kid himself. By the end of his talk he would have the entire group of kids laughing at some jokes and comical stories. This was Mike.

Camp had ended it's daily session at 12:00 noon on this particular day. By 1:00 PM Tikitok and Gurn Gordan were 1 mile into a hard 14 mile run. By 3:00 PM, Tikitok was into his 3<sup>rd</sup> Sam Adams...which he liked to refer to as “cocktails”.

By 5:00 PM the Gordans and the kids from camp were setting up for the race which would kick off at 6:30 PM. Tikitok, the honorable starter, strolled around carrying a 16 ounce red plastic sports bottle. He was busy mingling

with the kids, and sipping “cocktails” from his sports bottle. All the while, he was careful to keep the contents of the bottle concealed from his young, adoring fans. PJ observed the spectacle and could tell from Tikitok’s swagger that this was not his first “cocktail” of the day.

In fact, by the time 5:45 PM rolled around, it was rumored that this was Tikitok’s 5th Sam Adams. It was around this time that David Sierra, one of the kids attending camp, was having a conversation with Tikitok. Tikitok had just finished telling David that he always “carried a coin with him when he ran” because he wanted to be ready if he “met the ferry man”. Tikitok had a degree in the “Classics” and was referring to the fabled “ferry man” who would take the recently departed across the river Styx to the afterworld, if they made a payment.

Anyway, as Sierra thought about the significance of what he had just heard, Tikitok gazed past the boy towards Marcello O’Sullivan who was warming up.

“Dave...”, Tikitok started. “This is really awesome being able to come here and run with the great Marcello O’Sullivan.”

Dave smiled as Tikitok showed that childlike quality that he possessed.

“I can’t believe I am going to just be the starter today...I’d like to be able to run in this race with Marcello,” Tikitok continued as he looked down at the khaki shorts and sandals he was wearing.

Sierra looked down and saw the sandals and then noticed that Tikitok was spying the worn out Nike Pegasus he was wearing. These were vintage Pegasus...very well worn with holes in the toe area and heels that were well worn on the outer edge. Dave, like most runners had retired them from service, and now only wore them as a recreational shoe.

“Dave, wiggle your toes!” Tikitok asked. Dave, smiled and obliged...his big toe popped out through the hole in the right shoe and then recessed back inside.

“What size shoes are you wearing?” Tikitok asked.

Dave’s heart raced a little because he knew where Mike was going with this. “Size 9 and ½...Why?”

“They’ll do...,” replied Tikitok, “Can I borrow them?”

Sierra smiled as he kicked off the shoes and handed them to Tikitok. Mike obliged by giving the boy his sandals and then hurriedly put the shoes on.

“These feel pretty good!” Tikitok declared as he wiggled his toes...exposing his big toe through the hole in the front of the shoe. By now a group of fans had gathered and were observing what was taking place.

“Here’s a pair of shorts you can run in Mike,” one of the gathering crowd said as he handed Tikitok a pair of black, Sub4 running shorts.

Tikitok grabbed the shorts and went behind a nearby van. Moments later he emerged looking more like a runner and less like a race starter.

Gurn Gordan approached and said, “Ok guys...what’s going on?”

“Gurn....I...I have to run....Marcello is here...what a treat!” Tikitok replied with a childlike enthusiasm.

Gordan smiled because this was right up his alley. Getting a “tipsy” Tikitok into a race with O’Sullivan and Rosencrantz was the type of “sandlot” running event that Gordan believed in. Gurn was a runner in the most sincere form of the word. He often referred to running as his form of recovery. He had a tough day job as a child psychologist for a state child welfare agency. While some of New Jersey’s working class were worrying about a late financial report or the latest supply chain fiasco, Gurn was out there trying to rescue kids from abusive environments. On many days, he would literally find

himself driving home with his heart pounding, wanting to scream at the top of his lungs. It was at these times he would pull his Pathfinder over at the side of Route 80 and go for a run.

Gurn turned away from Tikitok and grinned at his wife, Laura who had just approached the group. Laura was just like Gurn...only dead sexy with long blonde hair and nicely tanned body. She, too, was an extreme runner.

“What’s going on Gurn,” Laura said with a giggle in her voice.

“Mike is friggin’ incredible....he wants to race!” Gurn said shaking his head.

“Do you think he can win?” Laura said with her eyes widening.

“I...I...don’t think he can find the starting line!”

Gordan laughed and walked off to continue setting up for the race.

Laura turned and noticed PJ observing the situation.

“This ought to be interesting,” she said sarcastically to PJ.

“Who’s he?” PJ asked as he watched Tikitok list to the left as he did his warm up strides.

Laura went through a brief explanation of who Tikitok was and some of his achievements. “Who are you?” she asked when she was finished.

“I am PJ Irwin...I just moved to the area,” he answered. “Can he possibly race in the condition he’s in?”

“I don’t know?” Laura giggled as she moved closer to PJ. “Rumor has it he had a minor heart attack during the last mile of the New York Marathon a couple years ago. He still managed to run under 2:20!”

PJ stared over his shoulder towards the striding Tikitok. He was now beginning to sweat, however, he was still struggling to run in a straight line.

“Well...this should be interesting,” PJ said.

“Our races always are!” Laura exclaimed as she started to return to work. “Make sure you come to our “Beach Blast 5K” in December...If you wear a bathing suit, your entry is free.”

PJ watched as Laura walked away in her “Mrs. Santa” mini skirt outfit and thought *I'll definitely have to make that race.*

As 6:30 PM approached, the runners approached the starting line near the bathhouse at the edge of Swartswood Lake. The final warm up rituals were interesting to observe.

Rosencrantz was doing some serious strides and stretching approximately 40 yards in front of the starting line. He had stripped down to his black and gold “Running Corps” racing singlet and shorts. His friendly demeanor had transformed into a very serious, competitive state. He looked determined.

O’Sullivan was jogging off to the left in the parking lot with his niece and nephew. He smiled and joked with them...but every once in a while you could see him look over towards Rosencrantz. He wasn’t nervous, and he wanted Gary to know it. Rosencrantz was avoiding the eye contact.

Tikitok was stretching at the rear of the crowd that was congregating near the starting line. He was sweating profusely and appeared to be in a trance-like state. It was very evident that he was losing his balance every now and then as he stretched. It was also evident to PJ that Tikitok warmed up in a low key manner. He avoided Rosencrantz and O’Sullivan completely.

Gurn Gordan grabbed the Megaphone and gave the pre-race instructions to the crowd of 300 or so with the lovely Laura at his side.

PJ was standing about 10 rows back in the crowd of runners while the national anthem was sung by Rosie Sierra, one of the youth runners attending the camp.

“How about a hand for Rosie!” Gurn cheered as the crowd gave a round of applause to the 13 year old.

PJ watched the girl receive a hug when he felt a hand on his elbow. It was Tikitok and he was inching forward though the crowd towards the starting line.

Tikitok looked at PJ as he squeezed passed him and said, “Com’on with me....we’re on a mission from God!”

PJ laughed and followed Tikitok until they were in the first row at the far outside of the pack. Rosencrantz and O’Sullivan were on the opposite side and appeared oblivious to the presence of Tikitok.

“Imagine coming from behind and beating O’Sullivan with a wild kick,” Tikitok whispered to PJ. “It would be awesome...wouldn’t it.”

Tikitok was visualizing the way he had done all his life. It was no wonder he studied the classics in college. While some runners visualized the technical aspects of their race...that is, when to surge, when to relax, when to kick....Tikitok visualized his race as an epic saga. He often referred to a recurring dream he had of riding a white stallion into battle. He would single handedly defeat his foes...and at great odds.

“Give ‘em hell,” PJ said to Tikitok as he reached out his hand.

“Thanks,” Mike answered back as he shook PJ’s hand. “What’s your name?”

“PJ Irwin.”

“Ok..PJ...Let’s push through this one”, Tikitok said as the starter raised the gun into the air.

*Bang!*

Immediately Rosencrantz took the lead followed closely by two of the local college runners, Miquel Printz

and Chad Jewell. By the 800 meter mark, the lead pack remained the same with O'Sullivan in fourth. PJ was running in 12<sup>th</sup> place next to an ailing Mike Tikitok. Tikitok's breathing was already labored and he seemed to be all over the course.

The 5K course consisted of two loops around the park's campground. The first 800 meters of each loop was in the open followed by 1200 meters in the woods. As they entered the woods, PJ decided to pick up the pace in order to stay in contact with the leaders. He briefly looked back at Tikitok whose face was pale and his eyes were partially closed. *He's done...* PJ thought to himself. Shortly after entering the woods, PJ hit the first of two minor uphill on the course. PJ shortened his stride a bit to maintain his momentum on the uphill. Shortening his stride reduced the wear and tear on his legs...he wanted them to be there for him later in the race.

5:15...5:16...5:17 the timekeeper at the mile marker read off the split as PJ passed. PJ was coasting and he knew it. PJ was a seasoned veteran and he learned the hard way not to lose a race in the first mile. If you wanted to win you had to be able to run negative splits. Your second half of the race had to be faster than the first. PJ was gaining on the leaders with only about 6 seconds separating them. As they completed a hair pin turn shortly after the mile mark, PJ could see the expression on Rosencrantz's face. Rosencrantz took a brief look behind him and noticed that O'Sullivan had moved into 2<sup>nd</sup> place. Rosencrantz looked determined to work his gameplan. Don't piss off O'Sullivan, and then, try to outkick him in the end.

O'Sullivan was the consummate professional. He smiled and waved to a few spectators on the side of the trail as he stalked Rosencrantz. As O'Sullivan passed PJ going in the opposite direction their eyes met for a

moment. O'Sullivan smiled and said "Way to go Mike!" PJ looked back and could see the pale Tikitok struggling through the course...struggling...but not giving in.

As PJ exited the hairpin turn he got a better view of Tikitok. Mike was pale, sweating, eyes were barely open, but his form was there...and the stagger was gone.

*He can't possibly be sobering up!* PJ thought to himself.

As the leaders approached the end of the first loop, it was Rosencrantz and O'Sullivan running comfortably together going past the halfway point in 8:10. PJ went by in 5<sup>th</sup> place in 8:18 closely trailing Printz and Jewell. Gurn and Laura cheered wildly for the runners as they passed. PJ could see Gurn's eyes grow wide as Tikitok completed the first loop in 8:25.

"You're friggin' awesome Mike!" Gurn yelled from behind the Santa wig and beard he was wearing.

PJ was now pondering strategy. If he moved too early on Rosencrantz and O'Sullivan, it would make them go early and he'd have no chance. He needed to get close enough to go with them for the last quarter mile. He gradually accelerated through the flat open 800 meters before entering the woods a second time.

Just then, from behind, he heard a voice. It was Tikitok. "They are going to see us at the turn," Tikitok said as he pulled up next to PJ and started to press the pace a little. He was right...as soon as O'Sullivan and Rosencrantz completed the hairpin turn, they would get a good look at Tikitok and PJ and the assessment would be made. Surely, O'Sullivan would not care, but Rosencrantz may decide to push the pace a little earlier to avoid getting beat by Tikitok and the unknown, PJ.

"Any advice?" PJ said to Tikitok, who seemed to be in total control now.

"Yeah...when they see us...look tired..." Tikitok answered.

PJ nodded and smiled. Very cunning...Tikitok wanted to be in the race when the lead runners hit the last 400 meters.

As O'Sullivan and Rosencrantz made the turn at the 2.5 mile mark they both looked over at PJ and Tikitok. PJ grimaced and squinted while making a grunting noise. He raised his shoulders a little to appear as if he was struggling.

Tikitok, on the other hand, pointed to the leaders and said "I'm coming for you bastards!" and surged forward.

*You son of a bitch!* PJ thought as he went after Tikitok. *You awesome, cool, son of a b'* he thought again as he moved up next to Tikitok.

"That a boy" Tikitok said as they ran stride for stride towards the 400 meters mark.

PJ's adrenaline was flowing and he felt the "runner's high" kicking in. This was going to be an awesome finish. With 500 meters to go PJ and Tikitok caught O'Sullivan. Rosencrantz was pulling away a little.

"Good day lads," O'Sullivan said as the two passed him.

Tikitok grinned and shook his head and looked over at PJ. "I think we are dead meat." He said to PJ.

PJ was thinking the same thing. O'Sullivan didn't even look tired. With 400 meters to go, PJ started to kick wildly. When he caught Rosencrantz, he thought, briefly, that he might win. But then Rosencrantz reacted. Rosencrantz shortened his stride for a few steps and increased his leg turnover. In no time he had put 10 feet between he and PJ. Just then Tikitok flew past PJ followed by O'Sullivan. As he passed, O'Sullivan said, "Don't quit!"

PJ shifted gears one more time and started to drive his arms wildly. He caught the 4 runners one last time but with 150 meters to go he could no longer hang on. All he

could do was watch through watery eyes as the trio dueled to the very end. O’Sullivan took the lead with 100 meters to go and finished in 15:45. Rosencrantz crossed in second in 15:51, and Tikitok finished in 15:53. A rigimortis ridden PJ staggered across in 16:01.

As PJ exited the chute at the end of the finish line he looked for Tikitok to thank him. To his surprise, he found Tikitok standing waist deep in Swartswood Lake talking to a couple of very good looking lifeguards. Apparently, he skipped the chute and ran directly to the lake after finishing the race.

PJ smiled and returned to his vehicle to change. Along the way he passed the kid that had loaned his shoes to Tikitok. “Did he take them off before he jumped in the lake?” PJ asked.

“Nope!” the boy answered. Later at the awards ceremony Tikitok took the certificate for a free pair of running shoes that he had won and gave it to the kid to make up for ruining his shoes. This race had made him a hero to at least one little boy. And for PJ, this race had made himself even hungrier to win the Open XC 10K Championship in December.