

## Chapter 8

August 15<sup>th</sup> had finally arrived...the first official day of “unofficial practice”. With most cross country teams, the first organized practices take place during the summer before school begins. Usually the better schools like Brothers Christian Academy (BCA) and Pope James will meet “unofficially” beginning as early as mid-June. Based on his camp experience, PJ was not that eager and decided August 15<sup>th</sup> was soon enough. To help PJ, Taylor sent letters to all students enrolled at the school informing them that the first day of practice would be August 15<sup>th</sup>. In the letter she took the liberty of declaring this team as the “most exciting new addition to RC athletics”. In addition, it introduced PJ as the “new” coach.

RC was a powerhouse in basketball and routinely attracts talent from around the world. Most recently, they had landed Ulysses Sousa, a highly touted Freshmen from Brazil who perfected the twirling dunk in Grammar school! However, in cross country they had no such luck. Over the last few years they weren’t even able to attract a full squad of runners. Three years ago the cross country team was demoted to the rank of a club, with very little funding compared to the other sports teams at RC. PJ’s management experience and practical common sense told him that the club status had to change. The first step to making this happen was to attract enough kids to the sport. The mailing Taylor did was a good head start. But...no matter what...the most important thing to do was to get the kids enthused about running and being on the team. And this was no easy task because cross country is a grueling sport. Anyone that runs realizes that what they do on a day to day basis is what other sports do as a form of punishment.

As PJ sat down to breakfast he picked up a copy of the “The Ledger”, the local newspaper. He quickly turned to the third page of the sports section and found the local running scene article by Jim Lamba.

“Sayed won the Union Center 10K yesterday”, he said to Taylor as he continued to read.

“That son of a bitch!” he barked as he read further through the article.

“Listen to this!” he ranted to Taylor as she turned and looked at him with a grin. *“I felt good today and I feel on schedule to run well at the Stillwater Stampede in December,” declared Sayed. “I look forward to racing PJ Irwin, again. I heard he wants to get another chance at me! Maybe this time he’ll do better. Assuming he shows up...and he knows what I mean by that.”*

Taylor looked at PJ with a grin. “I already read it,” Taylor said as she returned to the dishes. Taylor knew that Sayed was referring to the much-hyped River to Sea Run some five years earlier where both PJ and Sayed got caught up in barrage of attacks on each other on the internet and in the local newspapers’ letters to the editor. PJ had not missed a day of running in 19 years leading up to the River to Sea race that year. Three weeks before the race PJ experienced pain in his knee. Two days later he underwent arthroscopic surgery to repair a torn meniscus. PJ started physical therapy the very next day. Even though he was told not to run in the race, PJ got up early and tried to sneak out of the house to race against Sayed. It was a matter of pride. But to Taylor...it was a matter of sanity and she hid his running shoes (all of them) the night before. He never made it to the race, and for some time he blamed her for it.

“So....?” Taylor said with her back to PJ.

“So...What?”, PJ asked...bewildered.

“I think you know what time it is,” she said as she glanced towards the clock and then towards PJ.

As PJ studied her expression he noticed the grin took on a different...more provocative nature.

“It’s time for a “run in the woods?” PJ joked.

“No...it’s time for an ass whoopin’,” she responded.

PJ agreed and walked out onto the back porch to stretch before his morning run.

## Chapter 9

Jim Lamba was the newest addition to the staff at The Ledger. He started out his career at the now defunct Daily Journal, a newspaper that served primarily Union County. Prior to his arrival at The Ledger, the local running scene was covered by the legendary Grant Edwins..

Edwins had been writing for The Ledger ever since he graduated from Seton Hall in 1962. Now, here he was at the age of 62 gradually being put out to pasture by a management team that was interested in changing the “complexion of the workforce”. At one time Grant covered every race run in New Jersey, including all the high school meets. In fact, he had developed the first database of results and records, which to this day, he maintains for the NJSAA, the New Jersey State Athletic Association. He used to have his own newsletter, however, his new management team made him close up shop when they found out. What was once considered a perk for him for doing such a fine job for the Ledger was now considered Taboo.

“Good morning, Grant,” said Lamba as he poured coffee into his New Jersey Devils cup.

“Hi, Jim.” Grant replied while peering over his reading glasses at the spectacle of Lamba juggling the coffee pot while eating a donut.

“Are you scouting any of the cross country teams this week?” Grant asked. “This is about the time of the summer when I would start...” he added before being cut off.

“Nahh...I’d rather cover some of the big money races in the area,” snapped Lamba. “Besides...nobody reads about high school cross country anyway,” he added.

“I think it is exciting to interview the kids and watch them grow up during their high school years,” Grant remarked.

Grant had watched kids grow up in the cross country scene for decades. He knew runners, parents who were runners, and even a couple of grandparents who were runners. He never forgot a name, and he was proud of it.

“I think its exciting to sell newspapers,” Lamba chuckled. “Cross country does not sell papers,” he added as he turned to leave.

“I hear RC has a new coach.” Grant said as he poured the last of the coffee into a mug that had *Rozelle Catholic High School* printed on it. It was a gift to him from a runner by the name of John Hoffman. Grant had taken a personal interest in him and his brother, Bobby when they ran in Grammar School. Both of them ended up becoming youth All Americans and Bobby went on to win the prestigious Eastern States High School Championship. After that, they attended Penn State on a full athletic scholarship and John became a successful brain surgeon. All of this success triggered by a simple act by Grant Edwins.

Lamba turned and with an incredulous look and said , “RC has never even fielded a full team! Not since I arrived at the Ledger. They need more than a coach!”

“Back in the day, they were great!” Grant argued as his voice rose slightly.

“Back in whose day?” snapped Lamba. “Yours maybe...but you are living in the past...they have no chance! No one ...no chance!” he emphatically repeated.

“If it wasn’t...” started Grant.

“If it wasn’t for you I’d be enjoying this donut while catching a glimpse of the new gal in the classifieds area...see ya!” sang Lamba as he cut off Grant’s reply and left the break room.

“Young know it all,” lamented Grant. “He couldn’t write his way out of a paper bag, and now...he is replacing me more and more!” he added as his blood started to boil.

As Lamba hovered around in the classifieds area, Grant grabbed his steno pad and headed for the door. It was August 15<sup>th</sup>....time for a trip to Warinanco park.

## Chapter 10

PJ left the porch at 8:00 AM sharp. Warinanco Park was only 4 miles away and he was supposed to meet the team at 8:30 AM. He had plenty of time to run there and cool down.

As PJ sailed down Chestnut Street to 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue he checked out his form reflected in the window of Yeung’s Kitchen and the Rozelle Pharmacy. This is a habit most distance runners develop. A quick check of the arm carry and posture to ensure proper form for the remainder of the run; or, until the next set of store front windows.

PJ reached the park at 8:23 AM. The park was empty except for woman in an orange tank top jogging around the track. As PJ passed her he noticed the logo of the

Boilermaker Run printed on the front of her shirt. PJ remembered the year he ran the Boilermaker Run and ran head to head with his idol, Frank Shorter, who had won the Olympic marathon in 1972.

PJ walked slowly around the track while scanning the horizon for signs of high school aged runners. Finally, after about 5 minutes, a Ford Fairlane station wagon rolled up next to the track and out jumped 3 boys in running shorts.

PJ watched as the car drove off and the three boys started walking in his direction. They stopped briefly to let the woman in the orange tank top run past them. The tallest of the three must have known her because he said "Hello Annmarie" to her as she passed and she smiled back.

"Coach Irwin?" asked the latino looking kid on the left as they approached.

"Yes...hello," answered PJ with a macho tone. "And who do we have here?" he added.

"I am Teddy Dohne, and this is Rod O'leary and Andrew Cartolano." Teddy answered as he glanced over at O'leary who was snickering.

"What's so funny?" asked PJ as he fought back the urge to laugh, himself.

"Don't waste your time with them," snapped the smallest of the three kids, Cartolano. "They're brain damaged...that's all," he added as he glanced over at them and gave Teddy a shove.

"So ...do you guys know if anyone else is planning on showing up?" PJ asked as he scanned the area.

O'leary looked at Dohne and and they both chuckeld. "I don't think so coach!" O'leary laughed. "But wait until next week when some of us start getting detention...then we will have some victims..err-uhh...I mean runners," O'leary added with a hint of sarcasm.

“Oh...that’s right...I forgot...the detention class is actually the running club!” PJ wisecracked.

“That’s right!” all three of them answered in unison and then started to laugh.

“That’s why Ted and I are here!” O’leary boasted proudly while he pretended to pull on his invisible suspenders. “We were both attending summer classes and last week Brother Owen gave us detention for the rest of the summer.”

“What for?” PJ asked with a giggle.

“We’re not sure,” Dohne answered. “One minute we’re deep freezing bananas with liquid nitrogen in the back of Mr. Plank’s chemistry lab..and the next thing you know we have detention!” he added with an incredulous tone.

“Oh...come on Ted!” O’leary laughed. “We were suppose to freeze the banana until it was rock solid, and then hit it with a hammer and shatter it. This knucklehead smashes the wrong banana and sends goop all over the lab!” O’leary explained while the group broke out into uncontrolled laughter.

PJ fought back the urge to laugh as long as he could, but eventually gave in. As he did, the three kids looked at each other as if they were giving PJ the nod of approval.

“And why did you get detention?” PJ asked Cartolano.

“He didn’t.” interrupted Dohne. “He actually likes to run.” He added.

“Is this true?” PJ asked as he began to take notice of the muscles and definition in Cartolano’s calves and thighs.

“My dad got me into it when I was in middle school.” Cartolano explained. “He used to take me to youth cross country races somewhere in Randolph, at Brundage Park

and I would run on a team called the Stillwater Bears,” he added.

“How did you do?” PJ asked curiously, “PJ had heard of this team at camp. The camp founders, Laura and Gurn Gordon had been coaching this team for a number of years. In fact, rumor had it that every year that 50% of the kids in the Meet of Champions had gotten their start with running via the Stillwater Bears.

“I used to get my ass kicked,” he answered with a hint of frustration as he looked away.

“So why do you stick with it?” PJ quizzed as he stared at Cartolano who was avoiding eye contact.

The silence was deafening as Cartolano gathered an answer. Dohne and O’leary were both staring at him as if they were discovering something new about their long-time buddy.

“I do it because...” Cartolano struggled with the words as he turned his gaze towards PJ and locked onto his eyes. “...because I hear voices when I run.”

“And I see dead people,” Rod O’leary joked.

“Yeah...at the end of a race,” Dohne chuckled.

“And they are usually kicking your butt, Dohne!” O’leary snapped back at Teddy.

PJ sensed something deep in what Cartolano was trying to describe. “Andrew...what do you mean you ‘hear voices’?” PJ asked.

“When I raced in middle school I would hear this voice inside me telling me to keep it up...keep going.” Cartolano explained. “And every time I gave in and slowed down the voice would vanish; as if it abandoned me for letting it down.”

PJ nodded as if he understood and jumped to his feet.

“Well...let’s get started,” PJ said as he started to stretch. As he stretched he couldn’t help but notice the concentration on Cartolano’s face. “This kid’s got

game,” he thought to himself. PJ knew this voice...its present in every runner. It’s every runner’s fiercest competitor...It’s themselves. Cartolano needed to meet this person...he needed to discover the runner in himself. PJ was haunted in his youth by the same voice...and it was his coach that helped him discover his own limits. His coach...his mom...Rose.

“We’ll start with an easy three miles today,” PJ told the trio. “I’ll tag along and we’ll get to know each other a little better.”

“Do you know the course?” Dohne asked.

“No...not all of it. Why don’t you lead the way.”

“You hear that Cartolano...I’m leading the way!”

Dohne said as he broke into a stride in front of the rest of us.

PJ noticed a gesture and a nod between O’leary and Cartolano. A few moments later they stepped up the pace a bit until they were right behind Dohne. Suddenly O’leary leaned forward...as if he had stumbled slightly; then, without warning he reached out in front of him and grabbed the bottom of Dohne’s shorts. No sooner had Dohne’s shorts dropped around his ankles then Cartolano gave him a shoulder-level push. Dohne tumbled bare assed to the ground approximately 200 meters into the cross country course. O’leary and Cartolano fell to the ground laughing as they watched Dohne spring to his feet and continue running with his shorts still around his ankles.

“Kiss my ass!” Dohne shouted back at his two buddies. And then it happened...

...Dohne pulled up his shorts and broke into a sprint out to the 600 meter pole. It was a slight uphill run most of the way. His stride and arm carry was efficient...actually perfect! He had a slight lean and his

arms did not swing from side to side like so many young runners. His arms moved gracefully from front to back. Cartolano and O'leary took off after him, but Dohne owned this hill. They would never catch him. As he rounded the 600 meter pole, he eased up and allowed the other two to catch up with him. As a group they looked back and adjusted their pace even more to allow PJ to catch them. At first PJ thought of going with them in their mad dash up the hill, but these dogs were marking their territory. And PJ was going to respect their territory...for the time being.

As they neared the  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile mark of the course the group rounded a cement structure in the middle of the park.

"This is the Alamo." O'leary said as he pointed towards the steps which lead up to a garden hidden within the structure. "Kids from Cranford usually fill the place up on race days...it's a good place to cheer from. You pass it again at the  $2\frac{1}{2}$  mile mark."

"So where do the RC fans hang out on race day?" PJ asked.

"At home," O'leary and Cartolano said in tandem and then laughed.

"The mile mark is just up ahead near that left field foul post" Cartolano added as he pointed towards the baseball field directly in front of us. Warinanco Park contained numerous baseball and softball fields. In addition, there were soccer fields, cricket fields, a lake, tennis courts, and a beautiful all weather track.

As they passed the mile mark Dohne, again took the lead. They had just completed what was known as the first loop of the course and they were now heading back towards the white post that they passed  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles earlier.

"You know...if Teddy put in more miles he'd be awesome," Cartolano said to PJ matter-of-factly. "He

didn't train much last year because his father was sick and he had to help his mom out at their store."

Teddy Dohne was a natural athlete. He played soccer recreationally for one of the city teams. Every year the RC soccer coach would try to recruit him...and every year Teddy would turn him down saying that he was too busy. This year was different, however. His father sold the store and retired... and suddenly Teddy had the time to train and play...and be a kid.

As they passed the white pole near an area known as Lover's Lane for the second time, the pace quickened and they descended a slight hill and headed towards a bridge leading them to a trail on the other side of the lake.

"The two mile mark is right at the end of the lake," Rod O'leary said while motioning towards the end of the lake near the main entrance to the park.

O'leary inched forward until he was next to Dohne. He patted him briefly on the back and they exchanged a few words. O'leary and Dohne had been friends since first grade. They played PAL football in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades where O'leary was a star running back. Unfortunately, RC did not have a football team and O'leary decided to run track, instead. He was a fairly decent intermediate hurdler and 800 meter runner. This would be his first attempt at cross country. He was a straight A student and well know for his sense of humor. He also had a reputation for giving 110% at whatever he did.

"They're pushing the pace," Cartolano said in low voice as he and PJ headed towards the Alamo near the 2 ½ mile mark. Cartolano seemed restless as he watched and they fell further behind the leaders.

"So what is that voice inside your head telling you, Andrew?" PJ asked as they started to climb the next hill.

"I think we should go get them."

“I’m game if you are,” PJ responded and together they started to pick up the pace. As they strode up the final hill on the course, they had closed the gap to within 20 meters. PJ matched Cartolano’s stride as they passed Dohne and O’leary.

“Drop the hammer on him Andrew!” Dohne yelled as all four of them started to kick across the street towards the final lap on the all weather track. “We love this part of the race, coach. It’s like we’re entering the Olympic stadium during the marathon!”

Suddenly, the friendly banter stopped. Nothing but the sound of feet hitting loose gravel and heavy breathing. Cartolano shot to the lead with O’leary and Dohne close behind. PJ strode quietly behind them, adjusting his pace and gathering himself for what lay ahead. As they drew closer to the track the group sped along a line of trees known to NJ cross country runners as “the Nursery”. It was along this tree line that many a race was decided...many a kick was launched...many a hope dashed. And it would be here that quiet Andrew Cartolano was going to spank his too buddies for pushing the second half of the run. It was here that Cartolano was going to remind his coach as to who the runner was and who the coach was....

... and it was here that PJ would gain three disciples. His next move would win them over. His adjustment, as subtle as it appeared, surprised the other three. PJ blew by Cartolano about half way through the tree line. Cartolano shifted into another gear, but still PJ was gapping him. As PJ hit the track with 450 meters to go, he shifted into another gear and all Cartolano could do was watch. PJ glanced at his watch as he reached the white line across the track. He had 400 meters to go and was feeling strong. He picked it up a little as he entered the first turn. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw

Cartolano about 30 meters behind him. PJ drove his arms and increased his leg turnover as he raced down the back straightaway. He glanced back one more time as he entered the final turn and saw Cartolano driving his arms wildly.

As PJ strode down the final straightaway, he decelerated slightly. Cartolano continued to kick and caught PJ just as they crossed the finish line. PJ's time for the last lap was a fast 62 seconds.

"Did you just hear that?" PJ asked.

"Hear what?" Cartolano answered.

"That voice in your head... I believe it just said nice job!" PJ said as he turned and started to cheer for Dohne and O'leary as they sprinted towards the finish.

Cartolano smiled at PJ and walked over and high fived O'leary and Dohne.

"The old man's got legs," O'leary said out loud to Cartolano as he nodded towards PJ.

"Did he beat you?" Dohne asked.

"No...he caught me", PJ interrupted. "But I'll get him next time. Nice work out you guys. "

PJ stared at the three of them as they stood near the finish line panting and bending over trying to recover from the workout. *They have potential, but we need more bodies...PJ thought to himself.*

Just then, PJ noticed the same station wagon that dropped the boys off at the park waiting for them at the end of the track. O'leary looked over his shoulder and said, "Coach...our ride is here....are we done?"

"Yeah" he answered. "Same time tomorrow gentlemen?"

They nodded in agreement and walked slowly towards the car.

“If any of you know any other runners, please try to get them to come out. We need numbers!” PJ shouted to them.

As they drove off, PJ started to jog towards the park exit to begin his run home. He noticed a group of runners crossing the road headed towards “the Nursery”. They were running at a nice clip in perfect unison. As they drew closer PJ couldn’t help but take notice. They had to be running 6 minute pace and they were hardly breathing. As they passed, the lead runner glanced over towards PJ and nodded and then appeared to pick it up. The other six runners went right with the leader. As they reached the track, PJ remembered his watch and quickly re-set it so that he could time their last lap.

PJ’s eyes widened as he saw the group surge into the first turn. They were flying! At the 200 meter mark PJ stopped in disbelief! They passed the mark in 30 seconds flat! Unbelievable...he thought. As they rounded the last turn the back of the pack runners increased the pace and soon all seven of them were spread across the track in a straight line. They all crossed the finish together...in 60 seconds!

As PJ continued to stare in their direction he noticed that they didn’t stop running completely. They simply slowed and did a recovery lap on the track before taking off into the woods.

*“We will never be able to compete with them!” PJ thought to himself.* The run home became an agonizing chore for PJ as he realized how far behind the other teams RC must be. Hell, he didn’t even have a full squad, yet. They were going to need a miracle.

## Chapter 11

The next morning PJ got a phone call from Taylor. She pulled into the school parking lot and heard a *hissing* noise coming from the rear tire on the Tahoe. She wanted PJ to come down and fix it. After all, she had been after him for weeks to buy new tires because they were looking pretty bald.

Rozelle Catholic was situated on approximately 20 acres of property on the edge of the town. A small stream meandered through the middle of the property making for a peaceful, scenic setting. The school, baseball field and main parking lot were located on the south side of the stream. To the north was a soccer field surrounded by a cinder track. As PJ entered the driveway to the school he noticed a tall, slender gentleman with graying hair and a neatly groomed beard operating a backhoe near the bridge leading across the stream to the track. He appeared to be planting a series of new evergreen trees.

Suddenly, PJ slammed on his brakes in an effort to avoid a kid pushing a wheelbarrow from around the corner of the school building. The wheelbarrow was full of top soil and this kid was literally sprinting with it towards the man on the backhoe. As PJ watched this boy, who appeared to be about 17 years old head, sprint behind the wheelbarrow he noticed the muscles in the kid's arms and calves as he struggled to keep the wheelbarrow from tipping. PJ continued to watch the boy as he approached the planting area and the gentleman jump down from the backhoe to give him a hand. The gentleman looked up briefly and smiled at PJ as he passed the two of them. PJ smiled back and pulled into a parking spot next to Taylor's car.

PJ jumped out and immediately surveyed the damage. Moments later he had the trunk open and was removing the spare tire and the jack. When he closed the trunk he found himself face to face with the bearded backhoe operator.

“Need any help?” the man asked as he extended his hand. “I’m Ed Kinney”.

“No...I should be able to handle it” PJ replied as he shook the man’s hand.

“Hey dad...do you need anymore top soil?” came a voice from across the driveway.

“No...I think that’ll be enough.” Ed replied as he turned and winked at PJ. “That must have been his twentieth wheelbarrow load”!

“Did he run like that while pushing the wheelbarrow for all 20 loads”? PJ quipped with a sarcastic laugh.

“Yep” replied Ed matter’o’factly as he snatched up the jack and started to position it under the car.

For a moment PJ’s heart skipped a beat. His eyes returned towards the boy as he watched him jog back towards the work area and pick up a shovel.

“What’s you son’s name?” PJ asked.

“Mike” Ed said as he picked up the lug wrench and began loosening the lug nuts on the wheel to be removed.

“He’s a senior here and he helps me with the landscaping”.

“He looks like he’s in pretty good shape,” PJ remarked.

“Oh yeah...when he’s not working, he’s usually out riding his bike around or hiking....or running”.

“Running?” PJ interrupted. “Does he run on the school’s team?”

“No...” Ed answered with a chuckle. “He just runs...he just runs!”

“My name is PJ Irwin...my wife Taylor works here.”

“Yes...I know Taylor”, Ed answered...she helped us with Mike’s registration this year.

Ed had the tire off the car in record time and PJ rolled the spare into position. Ed snatched the tire from PJ and lifted onto the hub and started to tighten it up.

“Hey...your not making him do all the work!” PJ heard Taylor’s voice as she exited the school building and approached the two of them.

“I...uh...” PJ felt a little awkward as Ed tightened the last nut.

“She’s right Ed...why don’t you let me finish this.”

“Sure thing,” Ed answered as he lowered the jack and jumped to his feet in one graceful motion. “It was nice to meet you,” Ed added as he turned to head back towards the backhoe.

“Hey Ed, I am coaching cross country here this year and I wonder if Mike might be interested,” PJ said before Ed got very far.

Ed turned a smiled, “I’ll ask him.” He answered.

PJ thanked Ed for the help and proceded into the school with Taylor because Brother Owen wanted to meet with him briefly.

## Chapter 12

Rozelle Catholic High School was built in the mid 60’s and has changed only little since then. The U-shaped, two story building consisted of 26 classrooms, a chapel, a gymnasium that can be separated into three sections, and a cafeteria. The enrollment has wavered between 600 and 850 over the years. Originally founded as an all boys school, girls became part of the enrollment in the mid 80’s as part of the consolidation of schools in the Newark archdiocese.

As PJ walked through the main hallway to Brother Owen's office he passed the gymnasium. Fred Biff, PJ's neighbor was supervising a pre-season basketball practice. PJ's attention was drawn to the new Brazilian recruit, Sousa, as he soared through the air and gracefully delivered the ball to the hoop in a Jordan-esque layup.

PJ continued down the hallway and passed by a 100 foot long display case containing memoirs and sports trophies collected over the years at RC. There were numerous basketball and baseball trophies. There was a "retired" basketball jersey once worn by a kid named Gomez. As PJ walked further down the aisle he passed some recently won volleyball trophies along with some photos of past athletes and their coaches.

A few feet further down the hall and PJ came upon a large collection of slightly tarnished, but very impressive cross country and track and field awards from the late 60's and early 70's. The most impressive of which was the Penn Relays 2 mile relay and distance medley plaques won in 1969 and 1970. During this period RC had 7 runners capable of running the 880 yard dash in under 2 minutes!

As PJ surveyed the collection his eyes fell upon a tall, dust covered, trophy that read "Eastern States Cross Country Champions – 1969". This was one of the most well known races on the east coast. He briefly touched his head where he had injured himself at the cross country camp. Famous enough to dream about after a hard blow to the head, he mused.

Taylor reached Brother Owen's office well ahead of PJ who was carefully studying the collection of track and field trophies. The collection seemed to drop off sharply after 1971 with none after 1976.

"Com'on PJ ...don't keep Bro Owen waiting", Taylor shouted back to PJ as she entered the principal's office.

“I’m coming!” he snapped back as he started to turn away from the display case. Just then PJ noticed something odd at the bottom of the display case. There were words formed in the dust at the bottom of the case. PJ knelt down and cupped his hands on the display case glass to avoid the glare of the hallway lighting. The words came into view - *The Lions – RCXC – 2004*.

“Com’on PJ!” Taylor shouted from the principal’s doorway.

PJ jumped to his feet, slapped his hands together and dashed the rest of the length of the hallway to Bro. Owen’s office.

“Hello my good friend,” Bro. Owen greeted PJ in a very calm, soothing tone. Bro. Owen had been principal at RC for the last 10 years. During this time period he handled many difficult situations, including the near closure of the school due to lack of enrollment. Bro. Owen handled his affairs with grace and composure. But, along with the composure came a no-nonsense seriousness that helped get the school back on its feet. Quietly, calmly, Bro Owen cut through the everyday bullshit to get things done.

“Hello Brother,” PJ replied.

“And how was the first day of practice?” Bro Owen inquired with a smirk.

“Well...we only had three kids turn out,” PJ said shaking his head.

“Cartolano, O’leary, and Dohne”, Owen chimed in.

“Yep...those were the three!”

“All good kids”, Owen added.

“Good kids?” PJ chuckled, “I understand that two of them only showed up because they had detention!”

“Well...actually PJ...I trumped up the charges and gave Dohne and O’leary detention because I knew I’d

later let them off the hook if they went to cross country practice”, Owen said in an unabashed way.

“Oh Bro. Owen...I can’t believe you!” Taylor interrupted.

“Hey...those kids are great athletes and I’ve seen them run around during gym class”, Owen answered. “You wait and see...they are popular.and I am sure they will attract a few others to the team”, he added.

“Yeah...misery loves company,” PJ quipped. “I hope you are right...I’d like to have a full team for the year.”

“I have another idea, as well,” Bro. Owen said as he reached for the public address microphone. “Carmine Nicastro ...please report to the principal’s office”, bellowed Bro. Owens voice throughout the school.

“I want to offer you some help,” Brother Owen said with a note of seriousness. “Carmine has been a gym teacher and track coach here for the last two years. He coaches the sprinters, I believe.”

“But, cross country is for distance runners”, PJ huffed.

“I know...I know...PJ...that’s why we have you! But Carmine is well liked by many in the student body. I think he can help you recruit a few people.” Bro Owen explained.

Just then the door to the office flew open and in walked a college aged kid. You could see immediately that he lifted weights. This kid was ripped.

“You rang?” wisecracked Nicastro as he looked up to see the three standing near Brother Owen’s desk.

“Oh...I’m sorry...I didn’t know you had visitors.”

“That’s quite all right!” Brother Owen said. “I want you to meet your new boss....that is, one of the many,” he added. “This is Taylor’s husband, PJ. He is the new cross country coach”.

“Hey...Great... nice to meet you”, Carmine declared with youthful exuberance as he reached out his hand to greet PJ.

“Brother Owen told me I should con some kids into running cross country this year,” Carmine said sarcastically. “Maybe we could fill their heads with things like ‘the runner’s high is great when it happens’, or ‘the course is lined with hot looking chicks’.

PJ laughed briefly and then added “or how about ‘a free vomit bag with every uniform’.

Both PJ and Carmine chuckled and then PJ’s demeanor changed and he added , “ or how about...this year we will ‘return to glory’ and win the state championship”.

PJ watched for Carmine’s response...would it be what he wanted. Carmine’s eyes met PJ’s and for a moment the silence was deafening. Taylor had seen PJ do this before to people. He was testing Carmine. If this was going to be a two-man coaching team...now was a decisive moment.

“Screw the state championship... I want to make it to the nationals, but first we have to get past the Easterns,” Carmine broke the silence. “And while we’re at it we’ll see if we can help a certain post collegiate runner with his weight training so he can redeem himself against Sayed.” Carmine added playfully.

PJ smiled and looked towards Taylor and Bro. Owen. “O’K...He’ll do!” he said.

“Great!” replied Bro Owen. “You two have a lot of work to do!”

“Let me tell you about the two sorry bastards I caught spray painting the side of the equipment shed today,” Carmine told PJ as they turned towards the door in Brother Owens office. “The little shits were quaking in

their boots...I told them to run cross country and I might forget about telling their parents.”

“Nice.” Said PJ as he turned towards Brother Owen.

“Thanks Bro.”

“De nada,” replied the principal.

“Actually...”, started Carmine as they entered the school hallway. “Actually, I ...uh...well...uh...I conned O’leary and Dohne into convincing the two sophomores to spray paint the side of the shed. I was going to paint it anyway.”

“What do you mean?” PJ said as he started to laugh.

“Exactly... I set the two new kids up...,” Carmine roared.

“What if they can’t run?” PJ asked in disbelief.

“Don’t worry...they’ll run...I know them...they have heart.” Carmine turned and answered with a serious look on his face. “Their names are Shipp and Garvey...and they are good kids....if they weren’t....I...I...”

“I...I.....what?” PJ asked.

“I ...I wouldn’t have set them up!” laughed Carmine.

“You’re frickin’ awesome”, PJ replied.

“Com’on....let me show you the weight room and then we can head over to the park for the 3:30 PM practice,” Carmine said while leading PJ into the gymnasium.

## Chapter 13

PJ and Carmine drove down to the park in Carmine’s red Thunderbird convertible. As they roared down 7<sup>th</sup>

Avenue towards the park the air whistled through a tear in the convertible's roof.

"So ...do you think they will show up?" PJ asked.

"They better...or they're dead meat!" Carmine exclaimed. "They'll show...have faith," he added.

As they circled the park on their way to the meeting point at the stadium, they noticed a group of older latino runners in their mid 50's or earlier 60's.

"Competition?" Carmine wisecracked as he peered over his sunglasses at PJ.

"For you maybe....", PJ snapped back.

Just then, PJ noticed the same group of seven runners he had seen after practice yesterday. They were striding along the outer perimeter of the park.

"Well...I knew they wouldn't let us down," PJ declared as he nodded in the direction of the stadium parking lot.

"Oh...uh...yes, this is good," PJ said as he turned his gaze in the same direction.

"They they are," Carmine boasted. "You have Dohne, O'leary, Cartolano, Kinney, without the wheelbarrow, Matt Shipp, and Nick Garvey.....and....hey....look at that.....it's Vladimere Manasee!"

PJ surveyed the group and Vladimere jumped out at him. Not because he was the only African American in the bunch, but because he was stretching. PJ believed in warming up well before a race or workout. It was obvious that Vladimere new the importance of this, as well.

"Hello gentlemen", PJ said as he approached the group.

"So let me guess...Carmine is going to be your ass kicke....err....I mean enforcer this year ...ehh ...coach", Teddy said as he winked at Carmine.

“Don’t worry Dohne,” Carmine interrupted, “I won’t use these guns on you guys.” He added as he put his hands behind his head and flexed his biceps.

Dohne laughed and high fived Carmine. There was obviously a strong friendship and deep respect for each other. Carmine shook all the other kids hands as well and introduced the newcomers to PJ.

“This is Matt Shipp, a sophomore,” Carmine said as he motioned for the boy to come closer. PJ shook Matt’s hand and said “Nice to meet you...have you ever run before?”

“Nope...except for gym class and during rec league soccer”, Shipp answered.

“Well...soccer’s pretty good as far as running goes. How come you are not playing soccer?” PJ inquired.

Shipp chuckled and answered, “Because it is a friggin commie sport!”

PJ smiled and turned his attention toward Nick Garvey. “Hi... you must be Nick,” PJ surmised.

“Uh..huh..!” answered Nick.

Nick Garvey was a quiet kid from Rozelle Park. He worked during the summer at the local supermarket where PJ shopped. On one occasion PJ had remarked to Taylor as to how serious the kid stacking the shelf was. He meticulously stacked the cans with the labels facing all in the same direction. Nick was this kid. PJ knew the type...nervous at first, not wanting to fail. This is the type of kid that needs to be nurtured until their self confidence kicks in. Once it does...look out...an over-achiever is born.

“And who do we have here?” PJ asked as he turned towards Vladimere Manasee. Vladimere was the only African American in the bunch. He was lean, muscular, obviously an athlete.

“Vladimere Manasee coach...but most people call me Vlad,” he answered. “I heard you might need a 7<sup>th</sup> runner.”

“Really...from who?” PJ asked.

“Not sure...my dad took the message off our answering machine.”

“Well...I am glad you came...this is the first time we’ve had a full team in many years.” PJ replied. “I am glad you are all here...It is a great start for a program that has apparently been hurting for quite some time.”

“What are we going to do today, coach?” asked O’leary as he started to stretch.

PJ thought for a moment because he hadn’t really put together a workout strategy. By this time of the summer, most good high school runners would have increased their mileage to about 50-70 miles per week. This was known as building a good distance base. The distance base makes the runner more efficient and lays the groundwork such that the runner is able to handle more intense workouts and races when the season begins.

Unfortunately, most of these kids could barely handle 25 miles per week right now.

“What to do....hmmmm...what to do?” PJ mumbled knowing that all eyes were on him.

“What do you think you’re competition is doing?” PJ asked with a grin.

“I have a friend at Cranford that is running about 45 miles per week right now”, answered Cartolano.

“Forty five ...what!” exclaimed Shipp.

“That’s not enough,” PJ replied, “most good runners are in the 60-70 range and starting to throw in some threshold runs and long intervals....also some fartleks”.

“Did you say Fart lick?” Dohne asked with a grin.

“He said Fartlek,” Vlad answered. “It’s a Swedish word that means *speed play*.”

PJ's head snapped around and he gazed in amazement at Vlad. "Where did you learn that?" he asked.

Vlad looked up from the ground where he lay doing a hurdler's stretch. "In middle school I ran for the Stillwater Bears, a youth cross country program out of Sussex County. We used to do a lot of Fartlekking".

"*Well thank you Laura and Gurn Gordon*", PJ thought to himself. "Well then...you will lead us into today's workout", PJ said as he sat down to stretch the tightness out of his legs.

As the team stretched, PJ took notice of the comradery amongst the seven kids. This was a nice bunch...they joked with each other...but also showed a sense of respect toward each other's feelings. For the first time, PJ started to think that this might be fun...even if they get massacred this year.

Just then from a wooded area behind them came a group of about 20 high school runners. They were running so fast they looked like they were sprinting as they passed the PJ's team coming within 5 feet of them.

"Who's that?" PJ asked.

"That would be Westfield," Mike Kinney answered. "They always have a big team...last year they won the counties and were ranked in the top 10 in the state."

"Well...they must be mistaken," PJ said as he leaned forward and touched his toes.

"What do you mean mistaken?" Dohne asked curiously.

PJ let go of his toes and slowly raised his head and turned and looked in the direction in which the Westfield team was running. "Mistaken... if they think they are going to win the counties, again."

The boys looked at each other and smiled.

“Mistaken... if they think they can outrun us,” PJ added. “Gentlemen...today is the first day of RC’s return to glory.”

“Vlad...whad’ya say you set the tone of today’s workout.” PJ said without looking at any of the runners.

“Will do,” Vlad answered as he jumped to his feet.

“Which way should we go?” Vlad asked the team.

“Let’s go get Westfield,” Garvey interjected, much to the surprise of everyone else.

“Ok then, we go the same direction as Westfield”, Vlad replied.

PJ turned around with a look of seriousness in his eyes. “Actually, I heard Nick say *Let’s go get Westfield*”, PJ quipped.

“That’s right...I heard it, too”, Dohne joined in.

“Easy mile warm up, followed by a break into a fartlek...when we catch Westfield follow my lead,” PJ said as he broke into a trot.

## Chapter 14

By now Westfield was 800 meters in front of them as they circled the outer perimeter of the park. PJ thought that such a large team had to have some slower runners and surely they could not maintain the pace they were running when they passed the RC team. They were, most likely, showing their best stuff when they passed.

Vladimere Manasee was beginning to push the pace right from the first step. “Let’s ease into this, Vlad, and get loose before we start pushing the pace.”

“Ok coach, I’ll slow up if I’m too fast for you.” Vlad said with a playful smile.

Cartolano, Dohne, and O'leary all looked at each other and smiled, as well; thinking of the whooping PJ had unloaded on them the day before.

"Vlad..." Cartolano started.

"Yeah Cartolano....Do you need me to slow down further?" Vlad teased.

"Uh..no...nothing...nevermind," Cartolano replied.

*Today is your day to go to school* Cartolano thought to himself.

As PJ and the team progressed through the first mile he noticed an unusual occurrence. Every time he got within 3 inches of taking the lead, Vlad would pick up the pace a little.

"So Vlad...is the 3 inch rule in effect?" PJ asked.

"Oh...you noticed." Vlad replied.

"What's the three inch rule?" Cartolano asked.

"It's the rule that says if you come within 3 inches of passing me I am going to pick it up and put a hurt on you." Vlad answered Cartolano with a wink.

Cartolano did not reply, instead, he looked at PJ who was looking across at him.

"That's the attitude," Cartolano told Vlad.

PJ smiled...These guys have a great rapport he thought to himself.

"Ten minutes in," PJ declared to the seven.

"First acceleration?" Vlad asked.

"It's up to you...however you feel," PJ replied.

They were just beginning to climb a small hill leading to the main entrance of the park. Vlad leaned into the hill and smoothly picked up the pace. Like a swarm of bees, Cartolano, O'leary, Dohne, and Kinney surrounded him in a tight pack. Shipp and Garvey followed closely behind with PJ and Carmine bringing up the rear.

"Hey stud, I just want to let you know something," Carmine huffed as he talked.

“What’s that?” PJ asked.

“I am a sprinter...this stuff is going to kill me,” he added.

“Then why are you back here...you should be in the front!” PJ joked.

“Yeah...right!” Carmine gasped. Then suddenly, without warning, Carmine exploded into a full sprint. His speed was amazing!

“Coming through!” he shouted as he passed the pack of runners. Approximately 100 yards later the group eased up to end their first speed interval. A few moments later they caught Carmine. Carmine smiled as they did and looked at PJ and said, “23.2 seconds for the 200 meter dash ...I still have it!”

“I’m impressed,” PJ replied.

“Yeah...but this distance stuff is for the birds. I’ll see you at the end of practice...to drive you back to your car,” Carmine said as he turned to take a different route through the park.

“Ok...get in a few easy miles...and I’ll meet up with you at the track”, PJ shouted back.

As the group rounded the east end of Warinanco park, a slight downhill approached. PJ decided to hang back a little to check out the form on the runners he had inherited.

“OK Vlad...why don’t you pick it up again and take us through the downhill at a decent clip...but don’t sprint”, PJ suggested.

Vlad nodded and started to accelerate, followed closely by his six teammates. Vlad and Cartolano had a perfect downhill stride. Their knees remained low, keeping their bodies airborne the minimum amount of time. The more time a runner is in the air, the more deceleration occurs. Also, the more a runner is in the air,

the more they waste energy pushing up, and not forward...and the more likely they are to get injured.

As they neared the bottom of the hill PJ told the group to continue at this pace for another 2 minutes. PJ was eyeing the group of Westfield runners and he noticed the RC bunch had gained a little on them. PJ checked his watch briefly and then started to count the number of steps Cartolano took during the course of a minute.

177...178...179....180...perfect...Cartolano took 180 steps per minute. This cadence is perfect in the eyes of most who have studied the physiology of running.

“Yo...guys...I think we are gaining on big blue,” Dohne blurted as they past the cricket field”.

“We closed the gap to just 1 minute and 10 seconds,” Nick Garvey said from the rear. All six of his teammates turned and stared at him briefly.

“What!?” Nick responded to the group staring at him.

This is where PJ expected to hear a wisecrack. However, instead, he heard something unexpected that made his heart pump a little harder!

“Are you sure of that time Nick”, O’leary said as Cartolano and Kinney looked back to see his response.

“Yes...I checked the time when they passed the beginning of the cricket field,” Garvey answered methodically.

“Coach,” O’leary started.

“What’s that?” PJ answered.

“Do you think we can catch Westfield before they circle the park one more time,” O’leary asked.

PJ thought about the question for a few moments. The park was 2.1 miles in perimeter. The Westfield kids were probably running 6:45 – 7:15 pace. If they were going to catch them they would have to run around 6:00 to 6:15 pace assuming Westfield didn’t pick it up when they saw them coming.

“I don’t know...they are moving...and it’s only our second practice,” PJ replied. “And besides...we set out to fartlek...not ...”

“Fartlek...speed play... I can’t think of anything better than speed playing our way past Westfield”, said Kinney who had been quiet to this point.

Kinney looked strong...almost ferocious. He was more muscular than the other guys and his crew cut made him look military.

“What have we got to lose coach?” said Dohne.

“I don’t know...we might lose Matt or Nick for starts”, PJ said as he looked back to the two freshmen that were bringing up the rear. “How do you two feel?” PJ asked the freshmen.

“Good...”, they answered through tired lips.

“Let’s slow this interval down guys,” said PJ after seeing the tired looks on Shipp and Garvey.

Just as the front runners started to slow Garvey and Shipp strode past the group and never let up.

“I think they are going for them!” Dohne said.

“Hey...these freshmen are bad ass this year!” said O’leary.

“Alright guys...this is the deal,” PJ started. “We go after Westfield...but the Freshmen set the pace.”

The group began to accelerate again and quickly chased down the freshmen.

“Nick and Matt...your goal is to get us even with Westfield,” PJ said.

“Ok...”, Nick answered, “but they are going to pick it up as soon as they see us closing.”

“Don’t worry about that,” PJ reassured the two. “Just get us into contact with them...that’s the goal.”

For the next 9 minutes nobody talked...a rthym had set in... and PJ studied the seven. Nick led the bunch most

of the time and when he seemed to slow Cartolano, O'leary, or Dohne would get next to him to urge him on.

They were within 20 seconds of Westfield as they reached the main entrance to the park. They had another mile to go before they reached the track.

"6:20 for that last mile," PJ said.

"They know we are coming!" Nick said in a tired voice. He was sweating profusely, as was Shipp who had fallen back about 10 yards.

"You did what you needed to do!" PJ said to Nick. "Cartolano...what's that voice in your head saying?" PJ said in a low voice as he ran stride to stride next to him.

There was no answer.

"Andrew....what's..." PJ started to repeat himself when suddenly Cartolano shortened his stride and increased his cadence. The hair rose on PJ's neck as he noticed Kinney, Montlvo, O'leary, and Vlad making the same adjustment. They were going for it.

O'leary looked back at the fading Shipp and Garvey. He held up his right hand and gave the two a thumbs up sign. Then he turned back and refocused on the task at hand...Westfield.

PJ took off with the group but stayed in the rear. Cartolano and Dohne were leading the pack of 5 runners as they passed the public pool and ran towards the cricket field. PJ noticed that the Westfield runners seemed to have picked up the pace, as well.

Vlad closed on the lead runners with PJ in tow. "Let's push the uphill after the cricket field and catch big blue!" he urged the group that seemed to be tiring a bit. With the bunch tiring, this probably wouldn't be a smart thing to do because after the uphill was another 1200 meters before the finish line.

"It might be better to shorten our strides and hold this pace until we get to the top of the hill...don't go

nuts...don't drive the arms too much....and let's make a big move after that" PJ said trying not to breath too heavily.

Cartolano nodded his head and led the bunch across the remainder of the cricket field to the foot of the hill. As they headed into the hill the five of them leaned into the hill and shortened their strides.

"Beautiful...guys...quick steps up the hill" PJ urged as he neared the front of the pack.

As they crested the hill Kinney came up alongside PJ and Cartolano. Then O'leary and Dohne and Manasee equaled the feat. RC was running five abreast, and at sub 6:20 pace!

Dohne snickered noticeably as a Westfield runner turned and looked back at the quickly approaching bunch. The runner's eyes widened when he saw them coming and he turned and informed his big blue teammates.

"Gentlemen...it's time for a spankin," PJ said in a low voice.

Cartolano was the first to respond as he, once again, shortened his stride and increased his cadence. Dohne and O'leary broke next followed by Vlad and Kinney. Kinney was struggling and it was beginning to show on his face. His shoulders were beginning to tighten up and his arms were beginning to rise and swing a little less gracefully

"Stay with it, Mike" PJ urged from behind.

The first RC runner to infiltrate the Westfield pack was Cartolano. The RC bunch had formed a single file and were passing the hard driving Westfield team on the right hand side of the trail. They were now about 200 meters from the stadium entrance. The path was only 10 feet wide at this point.

Suddenly, the lead group of Westfield runners spread out elbow to elbow completely across the path in front of

Cartolano. The path was completely blocked as Cartolano caught the lead bunch. On the left side of the trail were rose bushes, and on the right side was a Park Ranger car. Cartolano looked back over his right shoulder to Dohne who grinned. Suddenly Cartolano let out a burst of speed and veered toward the right hand side of the group.

Dohne went with him...and then...to the surprise of the entire Westfield team (and to the surprise of one park ranger) the pair leapt into the air, each placing one foot onto the hood of the ranger's car and hurtled themselves past the lead Westfield runners.

Just then O'leary let out a wild yell. "Coming through!" he declared.

PJ watched as the lead Westfield runners went after Cartolano and Dohne. They were obviously a good team with a number of strong looking runners. They deftly took chase after the duo...and behind this bunch charged a weary O'leary, Kinney and Manasee.

PJ moved up next to Vlad and Kinney and said "Come on...guys...one lap...let's give it hell!" Then PJ took off with the three RC runners in tow.

Cartolano was now on the track going toe to toe with the lead Westfield runner. Dohne had fallen back about 10 yards. Just then PJ saw Cartolano's arms start to drive even harder...like they were banging drums hanging on either side of the runner. He was going into a full sprint as was PJ who was closing on the lead Westfield runner himself.

As they rounded the last turn, PJ started to decelerate to the finish line. Cartolano crossed in first, PJ second, and together they watched Teddy Dohne come across in third with the lead Westfield runner.

As both, Cartolano and Dohne started to bend over and put their hands on their knees and recover, PJ grabbed them and pulled them into a jog.

“Never let them see you bend over like that”, PJ said. “I want us to look unbeatable...and bending over gives the impression we are beatable...human...capable of being tired.”

“But coach...we are tired,” Dohne said.

“I know, but, this is my number one rule...no bending over...we run...we do our best...we don’t show weakness...Got it!” PJ said.

“Yes...Yes..” the two answered.

Dohne and Cartolano turned around and returned to greet O’leary, Manasee and Kinney at the finish line. The two quickly urged the others to jog and not bend over. They broke into a jog across the infield of the track and cheered on the final efforts of the two freshmen runners. Shipp and Garvey finished together, greeted immediately by their teammates who kept them from bending over.

PJ jogged up to the bunch and said “Let’s go.”

Together they walked over to the Westfield guys that were congregating near the end of the straightaway.

“Nice running you guys,” PJ said as RC jogged past.

“What team are you from?” the lead Westfield runner said with a huff as the RC bunch started to jog away.

“Rozelle...” said PJ.

“Rozelle Park?” the Westfield runner shouted back.

PJ gave a thumbs up response without looking back.

“But coach...we’re not....” Cartolano started.

“I know,” PJ answered, “ but let’s keep RC off the rader screen for now. We haven’t proven ourselves.” The Westfield team had started running earlier and had obviously run about 7-8 miles with RC only running 4. But deep down PJ was ecstatic. For a team to run like this during their first week of practice was unheard of. There was something special about this bunch. They had heart. But they had a lot of work to still do. Thirteen Westfield runners finished in front of Kinney, Manasee, and O’leary.

Twenty one in front of the two freshmen, Shipp and Garvey. This team had no depth...but they had guts and emotion....and PJ had to figure out how to use this to their advantage.