

Rozelle Catholic High School

From the Desk of Bro. Owen Oakley...

Principal

July 11,2004

Don't back out on me now! Taylor says you are having second thoughts about attending the cross country camp next month. She indicated "you think it is a waste of the school's money". I assure you it is not! I am getting a lot of pressure from the archdiocese to get the enrollment up. Improving our sports program is one of the many improvements we are undertaking. We really need your help and expertise. I remember hearing stories about the teams we had during the mid 60's to late 70's. Everyone wanted to run for RC!

The Xtreme Running Camp is the perfect opportunity to meet coaches and runners from other schools and

find out what “makes them tick”. Even though we will not have any of our own runners at the camp, it is a good idea for you to attend and meet some of the coaches from the neighboring schools. More importantly, learn how to attract more kids to the sport! Last year we only had two people sign up for the team. Besides, with your love of the sport, I am sure you will enjoy the experience. Have fun.

Bro. Owen

Ps... How's the job search going. I see Mifflin Chemicals is going out of business. I guess they made a mistake last month when they let you go. Have faith. Endure!

Chapter 1.

PJ Irwin arrived at the Xtreme Running Camp late in the evening. As the other runners and coaches watched a training film on hill running, he slipped inconspicuously into the back of the room. PJ felt uncomfortable attending the training camp because he did not have a single runner of his own attending. But hey, it was an all expense paid trip to the Poconos, a week of hill running, a week to consider the full-time job offer he had just received from Parker Engineering.

“Hi, The name is Lebwick...Wayne Lebwick” came a voice out of the shadows.

“Hi”, said PJ, “I’m PJ Irwin.”

“Where are you from?” asked Wayne, as he glanced toward the projection screen to check out a shot of Alberto Salazar winning the New York Marathon.

“Rozelle Catholic,” PJ replied. “We are located in...”

“New Jersey.” Wayne interrupted. “Anyone that’s been around as long as I have knows RC. They were a powerhouse in the 60’s and 70’s.”

“So I’ve heard.” PJ quipped.

“They had this kid, Savage, Joel Savage, that held the state record in the mile at 4:11. From 1968 to 1972 they fielded

nationally acclaimed teams in the distance medley, two mile and four mile relays,” Wayne added.

“They must have had a hell of a coach.” PJ remarked..

“A genius.” Wayne said as he managed a thoughtful grin.

“Gag’s was a former football player with no experience coaching distance runners when he took the helm as coach at RC”.

“Gag’s?” asked PJ.

“You know, Gag’s, ...Frank Gagliardo, he coaches at Georgetown now.” Wayne said in disbelief that there was actually a cross country coach on the east coast who did not know of the legendary Frank Gagliardo.

“Oh, Gagliardo.” PJ answered as he pretended to recognize the name.

“Yeah, he had amazing control over his kids.” Wayne said.

“But then again, Gag’s was one big, tough son of a gun that could probably wrestle King Kong to a draw. They were probably afraid to cross him.”

“Oh really? Tell me more,” PJ urged.

“Actually, the kids loved Gag’s. He studied thousands of articles and books on running and carefully applied what he learned. The kids really respected him. He bred discipline, he fostered a seriousness. You know, discipline is the name of the game in this sport, in life, too,” Wayne declared.

PJ glanced up at Wayne and noticed the seriousness in his expression. Wayne looked towards the screen again, this

time viewing an image of Abebe Bikila running hills in his heyday. Then, without making eye contact with PJ, he said, "It's been 20 years since we saw the long green line!"

As PJ hovered near Wayne Lebwink he wondered what he had meant. While he waited to question Wayne he overheard Wayne and another coach discussing a problem with one of the teams that had not arrived yet. Something about the bus breaking down and that they would be arriving very early the next morning. On the way back to the cabin to turn in for the evening, PJ hurried after Wayne and caught him just before he entered his cabin. "Mr. Lebwink?" PJ prompted.

"Yes" Wayne asked, as he reached towards the screen door without looking back at PJ.

"What did you mean, the long green line?"

"You know, Green, RC's team colors. They would run as a pack in races and come across the finish line single file, creating a long green line." Wayne said, as he slipped into the cabin for the night.

It turned out to be a long evening for PJ. He grew tired of answering the question "Who are you?" and coming up with excuses as to why he didn't have a team with him at camp. Finally, after one fine coach snickered when PJ told him he was coaching at RC, he decided to simply head back to the cabin he was sharing with 6 runners from St. Joseph's High School in Metuchen, NJ. Along the way, he thought of his wife Taylor, who had gotten him the coaching position at RC where she worked as the assistant to the Principal. Getting

PJ this job was a way of getting him back on his feet after the layoff. More importantly, Taylor could not stand having PJ at home during the layoff. He was driving her crazy. Lacking a job to keep him occupied, PJ had reverted to re-engineering their home and lives. He thought there was a better way to do everything, and usually, he was right. He could not rest if there was a leaky faucet, a broken hinge, or a lawn needing mowing. He was a product of his upbringing.

PJ's mother raised him on her own after his father was killed in Vietnam while he was still an infant. The only picture he had ever seen of his father was a blurred black and white one showing him with a few other eventual war casualties. PJ's mother made up for the lack of a father figure by enrolling him in the cub scouts, boy scouts, little league, the Polish Falcons, and an all-boys parochial school. She provided most of the discipline he needed and made most of his decisions for him until about 10 years ago when she started to deteriorate from Alzheimer's. Shortly after the diagnosis, he met Taylor, eventually married her, and still takes care of his mother who, at times, does not even know who he is. It was his mother that instilled the discipline that was intrinsic to him becoming one of the top runners in NJ. PJ could still run under 30 minutes for a 10K and was considering one final run at making the Olympic trials. With a little bit of serious training he thought he just might be able to do it. And now that he didn't have to travel on engineering assignments every week he might have the ability to train better and get his times down to the Olympic standards. The only thing that could possibly stand in his way was this temporary job of coaching cross country at RC this year. PJ wasn't very fond

of kids and he only took the assignment because Taylor had begged him. She had him wrapped around her finger. And because of that, here he was, at running camp somewhere in South Sterling, Pennsylvania. Bug ridden, manure scented, horse and buggy infested Pennsylvania.

As PJ prepared for bed, he decided he would get up extra early and go running before the rest of the coaches and runners got up for their morning workout. Then he would dedicate his morning to helping the kitchen crew serve breakfast to the other runners and coaches. This way, he would put off another round of introductions and questions such as “Where’s your team?”

As he lowered himself down into bed, he heard a radio in a neighboring cabin playing *Jamaica, Say You Will* by Jackson Browne. He remembered the song from one of the albums his mother had. She used to say his lyrics reminded her of Paul, her late husband, PJ’s dad. Now, she didn’t say much of anything anymore.

A cool breeze washed across PJ’s face as he waited to drift off into a sound sleep. He smiled and thought of his father. He wondered what he was like. He imagined what life would have been like if his father wasn’t killed in Vietnam. He wondered what it would have been like to really know the man.

As a second breeze washed across his face and slightly chilled the tears that had formed in his eyes; PJ turned and gazed out the cabin window towards the moon, sighed deeply, and shut his eyes for some much-needed sleep.