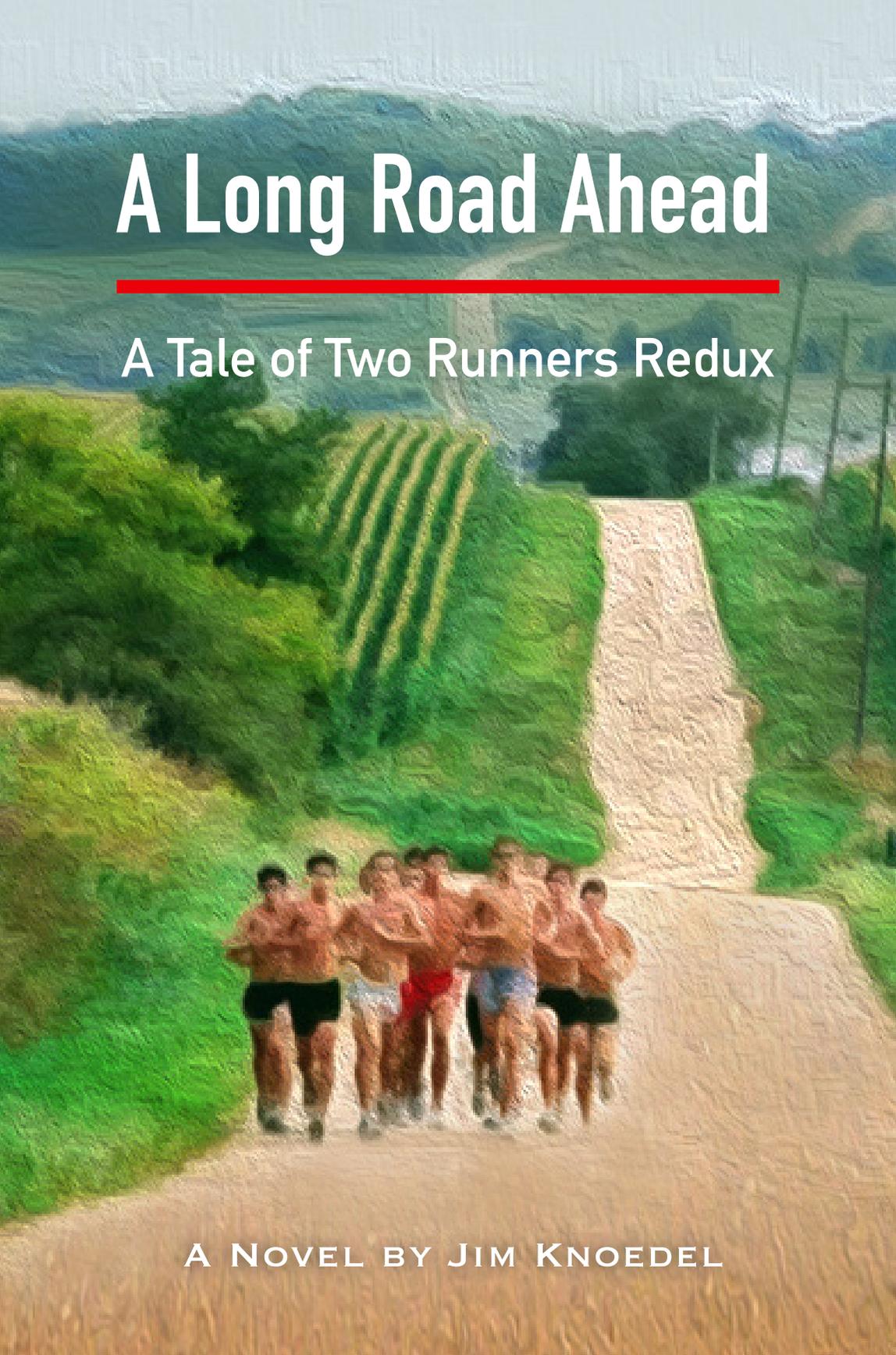


A Long Road Ahead

A group of about ten shirtless male runners in various colored shorts are running on a dirt road that winds through a lush green landscape. The road is flanked by vibrant green grass and bushes. In the background, there are rolling hills and a dirt path that leads up a hillside. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a clear day. The runners are in various stages of their stride, and their shadows are cast on the dirt road.

A Tale of Two Runners Redux

A NOVEL BY JIM KNOEDEL

A Long Road Ahead

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A Long Road Ahead is entirely a work of fiction. Although some of the book is based on real people and real events, it is all a creation of my thirty-five years of coaching, not on a factual recount of events.

Cover Photography: Wendel McRaven

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A LONG ROAD AHEAD – A TALE OF TWO RUNNERS REDUX

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Written by Jim Knoedel

www.taleoftworunners.com

This book is dedicated to:

My wife Denise who has supported me through this adventure, one much crazier than I could have ever guessed, encouraging me to take on a task that was years in the making, and finally putting my thoughts onto paper

And

To the hundreds of athletes I coached over the years at so many schools who challenged me to help fulfill their dreams. I hope I encouraged your aspirations and found the potential in each one of you, creating a time in your life that you look back on fondly.

Prologue

June 1, 1970

The black and white poster was taped to the inside of my bedroom door for motivation. A picture of an Oregon runner circling the track, his head cocked slightly to the side as though trying to pick up the sound of his cheering fans. Sporting long blond hair with darker sideburns an inch below his ears, he owned a steely gaze that only seemed to emphasize his competitive nature. Strung out in the distance behind were great athletes, people any serious runner would recognize, yet athletes who couldn't match his toughness.

This stud was the reason we were hitchhiking to the 49th NCAA Championships in Des Moines. Come hell or high water we would be in the stands at Drake. For Ray Clancy and me it was the chance of a lifetime. To see the freshman legend, the one who ran 8:42 in high school: Steve Prefontaine.

He was the Steve McQueen of running. The coolest cat on the track. One of the rare, extroverted distance runners unafraid to show a little swagger. To speak his mind. He played to the crowd like a diva at the Royal Opera House basking in the adoration of his fans, producing gut-wrenching performances and unbeatable times. Doubters challenged his larger than life persona wearing "Stop Pre" t-shirts at meets, but he simply smirked, kicking ass, and taking names, donning the provocative t-shirt for a cooldown on the track. I could hardly sleep Thursday night in anticipation of the trip.

Mom dropped us off early Friday morning at the top of the Interstate-80 ramp in Iowa City that led west towards Des Moines.

We walked down the entrance until we were about twenty-five yards from the main road and held up a cardboard placard adorned with a "DM" stating our destination to each passing motorist. With short haircuts and a gym bag each, we took turns displaying the sign to every car like vaudeville barkers. Within ten minutes we got our ride to the state capital.

Clancy told the salesman we were going to watch the NCAA Track & Field Meet, but all Mr. Loman wanted to talk about were the times he hitchhiked in 1942 while he was on leave from the Navy.

Two hours later we were dropped off at 31st Street in Des Moines, walking towards the Drake campus past massive oaks on long boulevards as we ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We talked of Marty Liquori and Dick Buerkle of Villanova, Garry Bjorklund of Minnesota, and Dave Wottle of Bowling Green, Roscoe Divine and Steve Prefontaine of Oregon – all of who we would see in person for the first time. As we neared the stadium we could hear echoes of the PA announcer in the distance.

Stepping into the stadium proper with a program in hand, we absorbed the blue tartan track that jumped out at us, the scene as enticing as a Caribbean cove. Spread before us was a sunken football field set below the track level, a tall white timing stand that must have been fifteen feet high, to the north a gigantic scoreboard with spots for eight runners and times.

Clancy pointed to the far side of the stadium where the high jump was going on, leading the way as we walked along the rows of wooden benches towards the action. Our eyes were locked in on the high jump competition, both of us sitting in tandem as a lanky Indiana jumper began his approach.

The blond-headed straddler ran at the foam pit in a straight line almost parallel to the bar, taking off from his inside foot and kicking the outside one up at take-off, the Hoosier's stomach and chest curling around the triangular metal bar in a smooth parabola as he cleared 6'8". An official raised a white flag as he rolled out of the pit. Clancy pointed.

“Look, the next guy is doing the Fosbury Flop!”

We both leaned forward as the Oregon State jumper did a “J-shaped” approach on the high jump apron and flew backwards over the bar like he was leaping onto an upper bunk.

“Radical!” I turned to Clancy.

As exciting as this and other events were, the highlight of our day was watching the skinny runners doing last second strides on the track getting ready for the last race of the day, the 6-mile. At the gun, a UTEP runner jumped to the lead and set the early tempo, leading the field through the first two miles at an astounding pace. Clancy clicked the split hand on his stopwatch and showed it to me.

“9:15, can you believe that? And they have four miles to go! I can’t even run 9:15. Man, this is so cool!”

Bob Bertelsen of Ohio University took over the lead on the tenth of the twenty-four laps and won in an astounding 27:57.5. Clancy scribbled on the program and then looked up.

“Wow, he averaged just under 4:40 per mile!”

We watched all the runners shake hands after the race, soaking up the excitement, and then climbed the stairs to the exit. I dropped a dime in the pay phone inside the fieldhouse door and Uncle Bob picked us up at on the corner of 24th and Forest, treating us to hamburgers on the grill that evening.

We crashed on the living room floor atop sleeping bags, beginning our new day with an eight mile run down Beaverdale Avenue. All our talk was about today’s races. After a huge breakfast, we packed our gym bags and headed back to Drake to watch the finals.

Dark clouds rolled in from the west as my uncle waved and drove away. Entering the stadium, we pulled out our yellow hooded rain jackets as the ominous clouds began to spit the initial drops of precipitation.

While the clerk lined up runners for the 3000 meter Steeplechase, a blast of cool air ushered in a sudden thunderstorm, spectators scrambling up the stairs and under the covered walkway behind the

seats. We stood under the portico wondering how long the rainfall would last, listening for the sound of a starter's pistol.

"How far is 3000 meters anyway?" Clancy peeled his second banana as we heard the 32-caliber fire.

"It's a little less than two miles. Did you see that guy in the program from Bowling Green - Sid Sink? What a name." I chuckled. "Yeah, it figures he would be in a race with water."

Despite the steady downfall I still took peeks at the race, my body pressed against the entrance wall for protection as I watched the competition, edging back to the protected walkway to give Clancy updates. The Falcon from Bowling Green was golden, Sink pulling away from Leibenberg and Savage on the last lap to win the event in an NCAA Record of 8:40.9.

Staring out at the rain, enjoying the excitement of the competition, I was suddenly struck by the certainty that one day I too would run alongside such greats at the National Meet. That was my goal. As audacious as it sounded I knew it was my destiny. The rain let up and spectators slowly crept back into seats.

The mile was next. We sat on multiple copies of the Drake *Times Delphic* to keep the water off our Levi cutoffs, excited about the next race. Clancy leaned forward and pointed at Dave Wottle of Bowling Green and Howell Michael of William & Mary as they came out of the athlete's gate on the northeast end of the track. A burst of sunlight flashed through the dark clouds that glistened off the track but it was gone seconds later.

Announcer Jim Duncan went through the names in the final as Marty Liquori stepped on the track. All eyes turned towards him, the Wildcat fiddling with the waistband of his shorts as he did a last stride around the corner slowing to a stop right in front of us.

The crowd quieted for the gun, the lanky Villanovan shooting to an early lead with the field close on his heels. Clancy's splits were only background noise as Liquori circled the oval while Jim Duncan identified the pack trailing behind at the halfway point – teammate

Chris Mason, Wottle, and Michael, his competitors so timid not one was willing to challenge my Villanova idol.

On the backstretch of the last lap Liquori opened a big gap on the field, the Wildcat twenty yards in front of the nearest competitor with half a lap remaining. From the trailing pack Wottle charged after a tiring Liquori, the crowd of eighteen thousand cheering loudly as the distance between them dropped from ten yards, to five, and finally inches at the line.

From our position at the beginning of the last straight it was impossible to tell who won, only Jim Duncan's announcement that Liquori edged Wottle by 0.2 with a 3:59.9 settling guesses from the crowd.

"Whoa! That was super cool." I slapped Clancy's hand. He showed me the stopwatch.

"Boy, I thought Wottle was going to catch him. That was close. Closer than Liquori realized!"

"Folks, you saw history here today." Announcer Jim Duncan paused dramatically. "The first sub 4:00 mile on the Drake track! 3:59.9! Let's give Liquori a big hand. C'mon, let him know how much this means to us."

Applause shot from the stands, the happy Villanova runner waving to the crowd as opponents patted him on the back.

We had been so intent on the race I didn't notice the dark clouds returning from the west. As if on cue another torrential downpour hit the stands and spectators scrambled underneath the bleachers again. The rain finally eased up and we crept back into the stands, Jim Duncan claiming this next event was going to be a "dandy".

Five minutes later BYU's Ralph Mann set a World Record in the 440-yard Hurdles, running a 48.8 despite rain bouncing so hard off the tartan surface it looked like hail. My Converse All-Stars and cutoffs were soaked as we dashed back under the covered walkway again, frustrated by the crazy weather.

The sub 4:00 mile by Marty Liquori and the World Record by Ralph Mann were astounding, but the biggest race for me was still

to come. The premier race of the weekend. While we waited, I stared across the infield at two humongous discus throwers from Kansas, the pair clad in the pink shorts and sky blue singlets as the implements skidded through the grass like stones skipping on water.

Sun began to peek through the black clouds, the brightness almost startling. It was the strangest day. Murmurs rumbled through the crowd and heads turned, clusters of spectators pointing towards the scoreboard at the north end of the stadium as the three-mile runners burst onto the track. We looked for the runner in green and yellow.

I spied Prefontaine and nudged Clancy, tremors running down my spine as he underlined Gerry Lindgren's NCAA record of 13:33.8 in the program. He pointed out the four challengers - Bjorklund of Minnesota, Buerkle of Villanova, Kardong of Stanford, and Fredericks of Penn State. They all did one last stride on the homestretch before they lined up on the waterfall.

At the gun, the St. John's runner went to the lead, setting a pace everyone seemed content to follow as the field circled the oval in a tight-knit cluster. On the third lap, Prefontaine grew impatient and took over the race, leading the pack through the initial mile at 4:28 and the two at 9:03.

One by one, the relentless tempo of the Oregon freshman phenom dropped competitors from the front pack just as quickly as an infant drops Cheerios from a highchair, a bunch of sixty-sixes leaving only three challengers remaining with a single lap left.

Prefontaine showed his 3:57 mile speed, producing in a 57.7 the last 440 to set a Collegiate Record of 13:22.0 on the blue oval. As he jogged around the stadium on the victory lap, we sprinted down to the railing, hoping to slap his hand. I spotted a gauze bandage wrapped around his foot as he approached, a blotch of red staining the wrap that was stark against the white.

He held the Adidas Tokyo spikes in his left hand and reached high with his right as he ran along the rail slapping hands with his fans. I leaned sideways with my hand extended and could feel the contact as he jogged by.

“He slapped my hand! I felt him slap my hand!” I stared reverently at my palm and declared. “I’m never going to wash it.”

Chapter 1

June 9, 1970

The NCAA meet in Des Moines was inspiration for me to train, to get more miles in for my burgeoning career, but it was also a big wakeup call. There was a glaring discrepancy between my ability and where collegiate success was found. All the distance runners I watched at Drake handled paces far beyond my range. To run that tempo for a three or six mile race would take months of hard training. Probably years. Their talent was intimidating, a sudden nervousness overcoming me every time I pondered the long and winding collegiate road ahead.

Despite the small scholarship the Iowa coach provided to cover cost of my dorm room, I still had to find a summer income to pay for books, school supplies, and the \$315 for tuition each semester – no matter how inconvenient I found it. So I continued to mow grass around the neighborhood at \$2 a lawn, the process of accumulating money for college as slow as filling Lake Macbride with rocks.

The mimeograph workout sheet Cretz sent out to each runner showed up in an official University of Iowa Athletics envelope the first week in June. I eagerly tore it open like a birthday check from my rich aunt, scanning the cover letter that laid out important dates and forms I needed to return, the second page a sample of training for each month. I re-checked the envelope to see if there was more information, but that was all it contained. His simple plan left more questions than answers.

Coach Cretzmeyer did mention he was going to give out shoes the first day, but also knew the ones I had wouldn't last another three weeks, let alone three months. I pulled \$14 from my lawn mowing money and biked down to Wilson's Sporting Goods to buy another pair of Adidas Olympiads, hopeful they would make it through the summer.

My mileage was steady at 8-9 miles/day in June with a long run every Sunday, but I could already tell getting it up to seventy-five a week was going to be a challenge. Some days the reality of it seemed impossible. My peak mileage at East High was sixty-four, but now it was my starting point, not the grand finale. Highs from the excitement of my new venture were over-matched by the vice-like grip of my nervousness.

Sunday runs were the excitement of my week because they were the only days Clancy and I could run together. Our jobs never seemed to mesh. Usually, it was me and my mind during the weekdays, but on Sundays I had someone to talk with and it made the time fly.

"Did you watch the Draft Lottery on TV Wednesday night?" I nodded at Ray as he continued. "My birthday is in January, so I won't be going through it until next year, but it's a little weird to think about."

"Yeah. Watching them randomly pull those blue capsules out of a tub" I shook my head. "Realizing this is deciding someone's fate... well, it's scary. Mine is in 1952 so I don't have to worry about it, but if it were in 1951 like some of the guys in our class I would have been number twenty-five!"

"I would have been one hundred-six." Ray sighed. "Can you imagine being in Vietnam? I'd think about going to Canada."

"Yeah, but as long as we stay in school we get a deferment, so we're cool."

Conversation ceased as we reached the six-mile turn around point. We hit the intersection and crossed to the opposite side of the road so we were facing into traffic. Time to get hay in the barn. After we finished the eleven miles, I told Ray about my trip next weekend.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. I’ll be gone next Sunday. Our family is going into Chicago to see my aunt and uncle. My cousin mentioned a relay race at one of the high schools, so I think I’m going to run it.”



Memorial Day weekend, the Gatens clan had come from Chicago into Iowa City for the holiday, my cousin Mitch talking about a 24-hour relay in late June and the need for a tenth man while we chowed on hotdogs and potato salad at the family picnic. It sounded crazy at first, yet the more we talked, the more intriguing the challenge sounded.

On our morning run before the big parade on Monday I told Mitch I was all-in, excited about taking on a new adventure. At least a mile every hour for twenty-four hours. Probably twenty-six or twenty-seven miles if the team was any good. Each of the rest intervals would have fifty-some minutes between – the race going on all day and all night.

Dad doublechecked with his brother to make sure the Demolition Derby at Santa Fe Speedway was on tap for that Saturday evening and there was a Cubs game on Sunday afternoon, the pair chanting the radio ditty during commercials as they drank beer and listened to the Indianapolis 500 on the radio.

There’s only one speedway,
It’s a track of clay,
You ain’t seen nothing,
Til you’ve been to Sante Fe!

Six of us piled into the station wagon Friday afternoon as we drove east on I-80, the back end of the car crowded with sleeping bags, suitcases, and a grocery sack full of games – Hangman, Connect-the-Dots, Tic-tac-Toe, and Bingo, alongside a Coleman cooler filled ice, sandwiches, and fruit for the four hour drive.

Early Saturday morning Uncle Erv drove Mitch and me out to Proviso West High School, the west suburban school sitting opposite

a large cemetery, the track behind the gymnasium shaded by a huge water tower. The sun was just breaching the top of the massive oaks as we walked towards the team camp, dew on the grass making each blade sparkle like a gem.

I was shocked by the number of runners as we approached the stands. Mitch claimed there would be at least ten teams, pointing out high school opponents as they jogged listlessly around the track. He introduced me to my eight teammates, each one eyeballing me like a piece of meat, trying to decide whether I was a champ or a chump.

“This is Jim Gatens, my cousin that I told you about from Iowa City.”

I shook outstretched hands. Coach Gummerson stepped up and extended a hand, giving me a red singlet festooned with the 24-hour Relay logo. We found a spot under the canvas awning behind the bleachers to set our gym bags filled with clean socks, four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, two apples, a box of Girl Scout Thin Mints, and big bag of Jay’s potato chips. Along the edge of the camp were two canvas cots, a collapsible card table with four aluminum lawn chairs, some sleeping bags, and a five-gallon Coleman cooler of water.

Through openings in the wooden bleachers, we could see teams out on the football field burning off nervous energy tossing frisbees back and forth, their voices loud against the chirping of robins and the drone of cicadas in the background. Mitch and I sat in the lawn chairs trying to relax, playing War with a dog-eared set of cards while we waited for the start. A few minutes before seven o’clock the event director blew a whistle and everyone assembled at the starting line.

“We’ll have a checker at the line to keep track of your laps, but I suggest your coach do the same thing. Runners must always have a baton in their hands. If you accidently drop it, pick it up. There won’t be a penalty.” He cleared his throat as a late-comer arrived.

“Any questions? OK, line up and we’ll get started.”

Everyone stood around the starting line, cheering as the eleven took off for the initial leg, a myriad of team colors and designs

streaking around the first corner. Teammates encouraged their friends around the track as they flew down the backstretch in a mad dash, coaches screaming at them to temper enthusiasm.

Coach Gummerson had cautioned us to stay off our feet and find a place to relax so after watching the first two legs Mitch and I went back to our camp to play cards with Tristan. I was in the tenth spot, right after Mitch. It was going to be a long day.

When we exchanged the baton in the afternoon, the sub five-minute pace that had initially seemed so easy was becoming more of a grind. Someone turned on a transiter radio and we listened to Lou Boudreau's play-by-play on WGN radio while we glimpsed through the bleachers at runners circling the track.

At suppertime, with fifteen miles behind us, a lethargy hung over every runner like a weary fog, each team camp deathly quiet. There were more 5:15 miles from our teammates, although Mitch and I consistently kept ours under five minutes. By 10pm, the fifty-minute naps and junk food snacks were no longer enough to keep us going strong. The excitement we felt fifteen hours ago was long gone. The next five hours passed slowly.

"What time is it?" I mumbled as Mitch shook my shoulder.

"It's around 2am. I'm up in about two or three minutes. Stick your head under the hose. It will wake you up. Make sure you get Tristan up" He nodded at a blanket. "Before you head to the start." He watched to make sure I was standing before he left for the exchange zone.

Seven other teammates laid on the cots or on top of sleeping bags spread out on the ground. No one stirred. I couldn't remember how many miles I'd done. It had to be over twenty. I was more awake after dousing myself with the water but knew it wouldn't make me run any faster. I was plain tired. The kind of fatigue you feel after a hilly twelve-mile run on a steamy hot summer day. I kept repeating that it was almost over, but I was too exhausted to be relieved by the thought.

Five hours later I watched the sun illuminate the trees again as I stood under the canvas awning. It buoyed my spirits to know we were almost done, but at this point even one more mile seemed impossible. Coach Gummerson told me I'd completed twenty-five miles as I stepped on the track for the final exchange from Mitch.

When I handed the baton off to Tristan at 6:38am I knew I was done. God was I dead. At 6:55am all participants circled the track giving the anchors a last lackluster hand, too tired for anything more enthusiastic.

Our team finished second, covering 261 miles and some change, but I really didn't care. I was never going to do this again. *Ever*. I shook hands with Coach Gummerson and slapped hands with the guys, then we headed back to the lot to wait for our ride, Mitch and I climbing in the car like a pair of old men.

We stopped at Corky's Drive-in on the way home, sitting on the picnic benches in front as we ate, afraid our odor would kill Uncle Erv. Neither of us said a word as we emptied the tray, eating as quietly as Irish bachelors. I polished off two "Deluxe Corkers", a pair of large fries, and two jumbo RC Colas. We finished the meal with loud burps and jumped in the car.

I crashed on the couch in their basement and woke up after a long sleep, unclear whether it was 9pm or 5am. Neither Mitch nor I went to the Cubs game Sunday afternoon.



Amidst all the war protests around the nation, my running routine continued into July despite days when the challenge of getting through a ten-mile run was intolerable and the urge to stop nearly as uncontrollable as a "bless you" after a sneeze. On these days I berated myself for breaking my routine, yet the rationalizations came as easily as childhood lies.

The daily fatigue from ten miles in the morning followed by mowing lawns in the midday heat was exhausting. I was as worn

down as an old eraser, unable to decide whether a day off was a wise choice or a missed opportunity.

The initial week in July had been an exciting challenge, the ten mile runs a testament to my dedication, but after a week of it, the enormity of the workload grew daunting. Each day I felt like the Greek wrestler Milo carrying the newborn calf, the additional weight of the miles testing my fortitude, worried I couldn't respond to the daily load.

Boredom and fatigue ran rampant, each morning a relentless battle of step after step, a never-ending assault of assembly line miles. Every waking moment I questioned my sanity, wondering if all this was worth the effort. If not for Clancy and the constant thought of the talent I would be facing, I'm not sure I could have maintained the workload.

The Vietnam War demonstrations still simmered on campus during the summer. Two more East High grads died over the past month in southeast Asia and we all knew of others fighting there now. The raw passions created an ugliness between the right and left, dividing the country as it had during the Civil War.

In the latest Gallup Poll, fifty-six percent of Americans believed the US made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam. CBS news host Walter Cronkite reported almost 40,000 Americans had been killed in the last three years. Stephen Stills' a cappella song "Find the Cost of Freedom" expressed the thoughts of America's youth.



By the end of July, I was pleased to see the daily miles, which hadn't been noteworthy in June, were now significant. It provided the measure of relief I needed to continue running despite the daily monotony which dulled my resolve.

The first week in August I surpassed six-hundred-fifty miles and I still had three weeks before school began after Labor Day. I was dying for the summer to end, to get my career started and run with my new teammates. Yet as I stood in the on deck circle, the

realization I would be in the batter's box soon stole my courage. Made me question my resolve.

I wanted time to slow down, to wait just a bit more for college to begin and give me one last chance to hold on to the comforts of high school. But like a stopwatch, time slowed for no one. Clancy was leaving for Kansas State on August 15th, Sunday's run our last hurrah. I had run with Ray for three years, watching his growth as a runner, sharing the ups and downs of high school; the thrilling wins and the agonizing losses.

Though we tried to pretend today's twelve-mile run was like any other, both of us were aware of what it meant. Afterwards we stood alongside the Statue of Liberty at East High, unable to say what we felt, hoping the other would broach the awkwardness. I couldn't extend the moment any longer.

"Well. I'll miss you brother." We shook hands a bit longer than normal, avoiding each other's eyes. I nodded and raised a fist. "Go Wildcats."

"See ya Jim." Clancy smiled.

I looked over my shoulder and waved as he drove away, staring at the sidewalk as I shuffled down College Street. Practice started in ten days. I prayed I was ready.

Chapter 2

May 26, 2002

It was odd to start summer training alone. For the past two and a half years Coach Kozak had been there every step of the way. He was my drill sergeant and my counselor at Grange High. My trainer and my confidant, teaching me when to step on the gas and when to hit the brakes. It would be tough to train without him. He taught me that patience can be a virtue, but that throwing caution to the wind can be just as effective. Without his brains, I wouldn't have had enough brawn to win the three state titles. Now all the work had to be done alone.

I opened the email from Iowa's Coach Wiznewski and reread the mileage attachment, anxious to get started on a new venture. As many miles as I put in last summer, these college numbers were a huge step into an arena filled with athletes far beyond my current prowess. I read the attachment again and then stared out the bedroom window deep in thought, the reality of great expectation weighing heavily on my mind.

It was hard not to wonder if I might have reached too far, let my ego and dreams run too unfettered. Wiz reminded freshmen to recalibrate minds and bodies, to think like a college runner and leave the past behind. I sighed, not wanting to acknowledge the truth of his words. Going from the top of the heap to the bottom didn't sound all that exciting.

My body shimmied as I closed the attachment, thoughts alternating between concern and confidence. The responsibility for success

was thrust on my narrow shoulders, the load far heavier than any I'd anticipated, and seemingly beyond my current capabilities. The first day of practice I was expected to show up fit and ready to race, to produce times in workouts I'd never run before. It was clear what I needed to do next.

I could smell the coffee as I walked downstairs towards the kitchen. Dad was reading the Saturday newspaper.

"Run in any place that has soft surfaces, you know, gravel or dirt, and one or two areas within fifteen minutes that have lots of hills. Stay off sidewalks. Cement is too unforgiving, especially when you are running eighty and ninety mile weeks." Dad drained the cup. "Plan on a nap in the afternoon after soccer camp and ice baths once each week. The first three weeks you're going to be tired, and I promise your legs are going to be sore, so heed my advice." I nodded.

"Should I stick with one workout each day or start with doubles?" I leaned at dad.

"I think you have enough miles under your belt. Go with singles."

"Thanks." I sat there for a moment, absorbing his input, then stood and grinned sheepishly. "Can I use your credit card for some shoes at Dick Pond Athletics?"



On many summer run I thought of Marie and how tough it was going to be to be away from her in ten weeks, our only connection the phone and emails. My girlfriend was going to the University of Michigan and I was going to the University of Iowa. I fretted on the reality daily, the steady march towards separation frightening. Losing her...well, I didn't want to think about it.

We talked about going up to the Wisconsin Dells for a weekend in July as we drove into the city for a Memorial Day game against the Padres.

"We went up last year for a team weekend." Traffic slowed as we neared Comiskey Park. "Maybe we can do some hiking. And

the water park. I need my fill of adrenalin. I could ride the 'Black Anaconda' all day."

"Yeah, that'd be cool. I'll mention it to my parents to see if I can have the car." We pulled into Lot G near the park.

"When do you have Orientation?" Marie asked. "I've scheduled mine for mid-July."

"Mine's early August. I had to arrange it around soccer camp." I sighed.

The Sox got killed by San Diego 1-9 that afternoon.

After the South-side game we drove up Halsted to Little Italy for an Italian ice at Mario's on Taylor Street, enjoying the atmosphere of Chicago. As we stood along the curb waiting for the brain freeze to go away, Marie pointed across the street at Italian versions of Statler and Waldorf, the two old men smoking cigars on their stoop as they kept an eye on the neighborhood. We laughed as they looked our way.



By the third week of June my average was 78.25 miles, ten miles more than I had ever averaged. But the challenge was daunting. It was a struggle to get more than ten miles before soccer camp, and it was just as tough to split the distance between the morning and the afternoon. How my father handled the same mileage in college while working forty hours a week was beyond me.

Initially, my enthusiasm got me through the eleven and twelve-mile morning runs, but by the fourth week of June, the relentless seventy-five and eighty-five mile weeks wore me down, draining an already overtaxed battery. Some of it was the heat of the summer, some of it being on my feet at the soccer camp, but much of it was simply from a workload I had never attempted.

I was pushed to a breaking point the last Friday of the first month, the four mile afternoon run after ten miles in the morning grinding me down to a nub. Encouraged by dad to take off my first day in four weeks, I felt like a million dollars on Sunday. He dropped me off in the far west suburb of Warrenville for a point-to-point route

on the Prairie Path, six cities later finishing in Elmhurst two blocks south of York High School.

The first half of the workout was a fun adventure as I passed through St. James Farm in the shade of trees, crossing Roosevelt Road by St. Francis High School, relishing the new scenery as the trail meandered north and then east towards my fourteen mile destination.

Running along the Union Pacific West tracks I stared longingly at the Dairy Queen in Wheaton wishing I had some change, the volume of weekend runners increasing as I passed into Glen Ellyn. I climbed over I-355 on the long cement footbridge into the blue collar towns of Lombard and Villa Park, wearily cresting the last bridge spanning Rt. 83 – a hop, skip, and jump from my destination.

Looking up from the newspaper as he heard the faster tempo of my approach, dad smiled and refolded the Sunday *Chicago Tribune*. I grabbed the bottle of water on the bench and laid on the grass in the shade of an oak, squirting a steady stream into my mouth.

After stretching I pulled on a dry DG-10 t-shirt and cargo pants over my running shorts and we walked the block to the Prairie Cafe for breakfast. As I shoveled the food into my human conveyor belt, dad told stories from his college years.

“I remember competing against Prefontaine, I think it was my junior year...”

“You ran against Prefontaine?” I dropped my fork and stared at dad while he nodded.

“Sure. It was at an indoor meet in Portland. One of those banked 176-yard tracks that reminds me of roller derby. Pre was on fire after winning the NCAA Cross Country Meet the previous fall and I was excited to race against him – even though he was far superior to me. Anyway, he led the two-mile from start to finish.” Dad smirked. “He was so aggressive, I seemed to remember him running something like 4:08 for the first mile.”

“MAN, he was hauling!” My eyes were huge.

He nodded. “I thought I was flying. I think I was at 4:19 for the mile but still trailing the pack.”

“Dang!” I was shocked to hear his words. “How fast did Pre run?”

“8:22. An American Record. He kicked my butt. In fact, he passed me right at the finish line and I still had a lap to go.”

“What?” Dad nodded as he sighed. “How fast did you run?”

“8:47.1.” He glanced out the window while he shook his head. “Even though I got lapped, it was the best two-mile of my career.” He paused and continued, staring at my plate as he recalled the moment.

“Pre was larger than life. A redwood among pines. His death haunted me. Our generation lost something that day.” Dad smiled wistfully. “You know, like the Don McLean song. And to be honest, it still haunts me today.”

“That’s cool to think you ran against Pre.” I shoved the last of the pancakes into my mouth. “Did you talk with him?”

“Yeah. I’m kind of embarrassed to admit it, but I did. He shook my hand after the race and told me he wanted to see if he could catch me before the line. That I was his motivation the last lap. So in a way, I guess I helped him break the American Record.”

“That’s so cool.” I smiled.

“Yeah.” He grimaced. “A year later he was dead.”



July 4th was on Thursday and there was no soccer camp on Friday, so we organized a family trip to Galena, an early celebration of mom’s 48th birthday and an opportunity to spend time together. After her battle with cancer eighteen months ago, it was wonderful to be able to share time with her.

We lined Main Street for the small downtown parade – waving enthusiastically at the float with the queen in the convertible, the clown on stilts, and the old men in their 60’s cars. It felt like we were in Mayberry. Later that evening we watched fireworks from lounge chairs on the roof of the DeSoto House Hotel, the four of us side by side as we “oohed and aahed” at the blasts of colors above.

But for as much fun as we had, the most enjoyable experience was Friday evening at the karaoke bar in Galena. At a young age

mom taught us to sing together so we had no problem in front of a crowd. Julie and I led off with our John Travolta/Olivia Newton-John rendition of “You’re the One that I Want”, only dad and mom clapping with any enthusiasm at our effort.

Seconds later my parents replaced us on the stage with a Carly Simon/James Taylor duet of “Mockingbird”, the small crowd breaking into applause at mom’s strong vocals. They began to sit down but I jumped up and grabbed her hand, taking mom back up to the stage, the small audience clapping in a rhythmic beat while she chose a song. I held her hand for support and then stood in the wings as she sang a soulful version of Joni Mitchell’s, “For Free”.

The soft spotlight showed the struggle and the pain of the last two years on her face, all of her being invested in each note. She followed with Patsy Cline’s “Crazy”, the patrons rising to their feet on the last note, their appreciation bringing tears to her eyes.

She bowed to the crowd, acknowledging their support with hands over her heart, a couple holding up lighters as I kissed her on the cheek and led her off stage. Dad stood and held out his hand as she approached our table, twirling her in a circle and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her in tight for a kiss. Mom beamed; her face transformed as though she was twenty years old again.

Later, we strolled back to the hotel singing songs she taught us years ago, my sister and mother skipping arm-in-arm down the sidewalk towards the DeSoto House like LaVern and Shirley, dad and I smiling at our good fortune. I wished I could capture the evening in a bottle, but as writer Norman Maclean stated so well, “life is not a work of art, and that moment could not last.” Sadly, he was right.

On Sunday I turned in one of my fastest loops at Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve, flying by swarms of middle-aged runners and high school kids like they were standing still. I had never broken fifty-four minutes for the 9.7 miles and yet I did today. Whether it was the cathartic effect of the weekend, or simply that I only ran eight miles on Saturday, I really didn’t know. Regardless, it gave me hope my miles were paying off.

I grabbed a water bottle out of the back seat and wiped the sweat off my face as I swallowed the twenty ounces in one continuous swig. Stretching on the pavement in an open spot beside my car, I listened to chirping cicadas, glancing up as a figure approached me with a big smile. It was one of my former high school rivals. Dan Glatz.

The conversation quickly moved to college running, and how he was doing.

“How was your first year at Ohio State?” What a dumb question. I bet he had been asked that a million times.

“Great.” He smiled ruefully. “Though the first month of school, I was clueless. I thought I was going to ace all my classes and grab the #1 spot on the cross country team. NOT!” He smirked. “I soon found out different. The professors didn’t really care about teaching and I definitely overestimated my impact on the team.”

“Yeah, I heard the transition is pretty tough.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Eight o’clock classes sucked, especially after a four to five-miles each morning. I had to get up at 6:15 to fit it in, throw down some food, and then hustle to class. By the end of September, I was exhausted from the miles and the hours of study – trying to burn the candle at both ends.”

“Did it affect your grades? Mom is really harping on a balance between studies and running. I’m a little nervous. The increase in miles is already killing me and school hasn’t even started.”

“That’s where the trouble began.” Glatz pursed his lips. “After the first month I was so tired all I wanted to do was sleep. There didn’t seem to be enough hours in a day to get everything done.”

“Sounds tough.” His words made me nervous. “What advice would you give? I mean, so I don’t screw up...” I grimaced at my faux pas. “Sorry, no offense.”

“Don’t worry, I understand what you mean. Don’t, and I mean don’t, take any 8am classes. You need your sleep. Even if you have already signed up for an eight o’clock class, you can change it the first week. And make sure you do.”

He paused as we watched a marathon group from Team in Training shuffle by like a throng of tourists in the Loop.

“Focus on getting at least 8 hours of sleep at night and keep your classes in the middle of the day, even if they’re back to back. And I’d try to get in a nap if possible. All I remember of my freshman year is fatigue.” He paused. “Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t completely suck, but if I knew then what I know now...well.”

We shook sweaty hands and parted ways. I crept towards the car like an eighty year old behind a walker, pulling a dry t-shirt over my head, going over what Glatz had said. Despite all my work, the approach of college made me nervous. I stared at the yellow line on Cass Ave. as I drove home lost in thought, worried about the obstacles and adversity I would face ahead.

After my shower, I sat down at the kitchen table absent-mindedly pouring a second bowl of cereal, absorbed in an article in the newspaper. The story from a *Boston Globe* writer revealed a widespread sexual abuse scandal by Catholic priests over the previous thirty years. Almost 800 children were violated, both in the Boston area and around the nation.

When dad saw what I was reading he went on a five minute rant about the conspiracy of the Catholic hierarchy to protect their image. I was shocked at his vehemence. He was raised a Catholic, but never said a word about religion and never asked me to go to church. I had obviously touched a sore spot. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know why.



The idea for the race blossomed at a block party on our street while we watched a pair of junior high kids take on our neighbors in a game of “Bag Toss”.

“Whenever I see this game it makes me think of Jarts.” Uncle Andy chuckled. “You remember when Stevie Butler got hit by one and it left a dent in his forehead?” They both laughed at the memory.

"Yeah, I seem to remember Mitch got hit by one also." Uncle Andy nodded.

"Is he the one you ran a marathon with?" I asked. Dad smiled.

"Yep. He's our cousin", pointing back and forth from him to Andy. "Mitch and I ran it after my freshman year at Iowa. It was up in northern Wisconsin." His face lit up. "Mitch always came up with some summer races over the years." He took a sip of beer. "Lots of Finnish immigrants live in that part of the state. It was the Paavo Nurmi Marathon, named after a Finnish runner from the 1920's. He won 9 Olympic Gold medals." Dad took another sip of the Goose Island beer.

"I took a train into Chicago and then we drove six hours up to Hurley on Friday. It's a small town near Lake Superior. We stayed overnight with a family in Ironwood and then ran the race on Saturday. It was so much fun. There was a torch lighting ceremony on the first night and then some type of Finnish polka on Main Street. One of the women grabbed Mitch and got him to dance. He was so embarrassed." Dad grabbed a handful of nachos, smiling at the memory.

"Saturday morning, they bused us to the starting line in Upton, I think that's the name, and then we ran the twenty-six miles back to Hurley. We started at about a 6:15 pace, and then I picked it up because I wanted to break 2:40." Dad grimaced. "But I died and ended up running 2:50. I passed ten miles at just over an hour and twenty miles at just under two hours, but within two miles I hit the Wall. The last four miles seemed like they would never end. They were the longest four miles of my life." He shook his head and smiled despite what should have been a painful memory.

"Despite all the pain I had a great time."



We were both excited about the trip to Hurley to run the Paavo Nurmi Half Marathon the first week of August. Dad jumped on my suggestion about returning to northern Wisconsin like a Saturday

morning cowboy leaping atop his horse. He was thrilled to relive one of the best experiences of his life.

I listened quietly as he talked about training and tactics all the way up, cataloging his tips for my years ahead. I worried the town wouldn't have the same charm he described, but when we pulled onto the main street of downtown Hurley I could tell by his expression it was the same.

"Poor John's Cafe." Dad smiled as he pointed at the restaurant like a little kid in an I spy game. "I knew it was something with John in it."

That evening we enjoyed the spaghetti dinner, discussing the many luxuries not available thirty-three years earlier. I only had to run 13.1 miles and not 26.2. I slept in an air conditioned bedroom and not on a cot on the porch. I wore top notch racing flats, had a wrist-watch which provided splits and computer access to a topographical map of the course. I even had water every mile and an aid station every two to three miles. Dad claimed I would have a support team if he could locate a bike.

As the pasta digested, we discussed my plan.

"My goal is to run 1:12." A runner walked by with an ice cream cone. I looked down the street for the source.

"OK, let's break it down. A 1:12, is a 5:30 pace, so you might as well get right to it." He always surprised me how quickly he figured splits. "Even if you struggle a bit at the end, this gives you some cushion."

Saturday morning, I rode the school bus to the starting line in Gile while dad went in search of a bicycle, hoping to ride beside me as a pit crew. I looked up and down the streets of the tiny town as I warmed up, many of the participants clad in orange shirts from previous years.

None of them had that look – the shallow cheekbones, underdeveloped chest and wash-board abs that gave me pause, unless they were hiding in a portable toilet. I was going to have to do the work by myself.

Despite hills, I rang up 5:30's on the initial miles like an adding machine, my pace so steady I could have pointed to where the distance markers should be located. I wasn't the least bit surprised to see 27:32 on the five mile clock as I ran along the small lake, disappointed there wasn't a breeze off the water to cool me down.

The early morning temperatures and high humidity left dew thick on the grass, the sun filling the sky as I ran southward, sweat rolling off my face and elbows in steady streams as I notched seven miles. Dad still hadn't shown up. The solitary running was getting tiresome.

I ran by pajamaed kids watching from camp chairs along the course, an occasional dog barking from the back yard, the lead police car fifty yards ahead my only company. It would have been nice to have some competition to give me something to focus on. Anything other than my growing fatigue.

At Hwy 51 the course turned to the north for the last five mile stretch into the finish. The thought of another twenty-eight minutes of this tempo was suddenly daunting. A shout over my shoulder pulled me from my reverie. I smiled at the figure of dad atop a bicycle far too small for his tall frame, the effect like a clown on a tiny circus bike. He pulled up alongside, handing me a water bottle.

"How you feeling?"

"Honestly, not too bad. Although that last hill was rough. And I'm starting to get bored, so your timing is perfect. The last three miles will be a grind, especially the climb into town, but I still think a 1:12 is realistic."

"I can only hope you finish stronger than I did." Dad grinned.

When I hit ten miles at 55:41, I knew it was in the bag, even though the hills made my legs feel like blocks of cement. The final climb near the twelve mile mark was burdensome, but dad's constant banter kept me on task.

I leaned into the left turn at Silver Street, the finish banner appearing in the distance like a desert oasis, relief washing over my weary body with the end in sight. Two more blocks.

The announcer's voice echoed off the downtown buildings, the sound of applause increasing in intensity as the line approached. I pumped my fist the last fifty meters and raised my arms as I ran through the finish tape, happy with the 1:12.55 on the clock. Dad was so excited he nearly crashed the bike at the back of the chutes, jumping off the two-wheeler like a foregone Pony Express rider.

"Awesome. That was so awesome. Congratulations." Dad put his arm around my shoulder. "Let's get some Mojakka!"

I'd barely caught my breath and he was already diving into his past. I was looking forward to my future. Cross country began in ten days.