Cross Country: A Recollection

Cross country is a reservoir of memory and sensation. It is the sound of labored breathing, the smell of analgesic, crude jokes, bright autumn mornings, teammates, laugher, sweat and spit, pain, disappointment, the devotion of a coach.

A story is wanting to be told.

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September 14, 1974. This morning we run the first meet of our college season. The weather is still summery, but the freshly cut grass in the park is brown and the leaves on the tree are beginning to bleed yellow. It is early Saturday morning and the park is out of town, so coaches, timers, and a couple of girlfriends are the only spectators. We jog part of the course together—the seven of us—to loosen up.

"So this Roach guy is good. How good?"

“Eighth in Peachtree this summer.”

“Hey Caldwell, you know Roach?”

“I saw him at Peachtree.”

“Which one is he?”

“The chubby one, with the blond hair.”

“Shit. The chubby one. He doesn’t look very fast.”

Caldwell sputters and laughs. “Well, then, Les, you go out with him. He was leading Peachtree at five miles.”

Les grins impishly; he is incorrigible. “He still doesn’t look very fast. I think we can beat ’em. Beat Roach. What d’you think, Monster?”

Monster—whose nickname derives from his competitive instinct, not his appearance—is the only senior on the team and normally our top runner, but he is recovering from mononucleosis. There has been much speculation about how he got it. He mumbles something gruffly, and Les jogs over to pacify him.

We come slowly around a field and back to the starting area and gather around Coach. He is a medical doctor connected with the university’s medical school who is himself a competitive runner and who donates his time to coach us. He will be forty this year but looks younger.

“How do you feel, Robbie?”

“Okay, Coach.”

He watches me for a minute while I stretch. I trained hard this summer. We both know I should run well today. I am thinking about it too much.

He turns to Caldwell. “Are you ready to go, Bill?”

“Yeah, Coach.”

“Is that your sister?”

“Yeah, she’s a freshman this year.”

Coach looks amused; his eyes flash playfully. “She’s cute . . . Keep Lester away from her.”

He leaves us to talk to the other team’s coach. It is close to race time now and we are quiet, collecting ourselves for the effort ahead. We know that in a few minutes we will be suffering excruciating pain, and we know too this pain is justified only when we run well. These minutes before a race are filled with dread and an exquisite anticipation.

Coach returns and looks at us, one after another.

“Are we ready? Okay. Help each other out there today. Run together. Pack it in. Their top man is good, so let him go.”

He pauses. He is not prone to the verbiage normally heard in pep talks.

“Do your best.”

We strip off our sweats and go to the line. We’re past nervousness now. The blessed event is upon us. The starting gun fires quickly and we’re off, stampeding across an open field toward the first turn. The course is flat and grassy and not particularly scenic, but the park is in the country and Tennessee country is beautiful at this time of year.

Cross country is the most idyllic of running sports. Races, which in college are between four and six miles long, are run on golf courses, trails, neighborhood streets—

anywhere except around a track. Landscape and terrain are important parts of cross country.

The start of the race is fast, and Roach is as good as his reputation. He assumes command of the race early, and the rest of us are running for second. Monster is still weak and I make a wrong turn—a "mental mistake," according to Coach—and lose a place I never regain, and the two teams tie.

We walk-jog a mile to cool down, then drift back into a circle around Coach. Although we should have won today, he seems pleased with our effort. He wants us to build steadily through the season, peaking for the conference meet in early November, and today we showed him we're in good base condition. We review the race mile by mile, he tells us he'll meet us early in the morning for our Sunday run, and we're back at school by noon.

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Our cross-country team was just two years old that fall; he had been our coach from the beginning. Our first year—my freshman year, 1972—he had funded us out of his own pocket. We were his team, and stamped with his personality. Running was for him more than sport; it was a test of character, a lesson in discipline. Accordingly, he motivated us not with promises and threats, but through personal example and by appeal to that part of ourselves that strives for excellence. He often ran workouts with us,

pushing us. He was demanding, obdurate, unrelenting. Infuriating and inspiring. We were his team, and we ran more for him than for the university.

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It is a weekday afternoon in late September. We meet as usual, at 3:30, at the entrance to Centennial Park a few blocks west of campus. By ones and twos we jog up, joking, spitting. Coach told us yesterday that we will run hill zippers today, one of our hardest workouts, so we are talkative and a bit edgy, anticipating the unpleasantness. He pulls up in his Vega a few minutes later, and we surround him as he scrutinizes us.

"Les, did you get enough sleep last night?"

"Sure, Coach."

"You still seeing that blond-haired girl? What's her name? Denise?"

Les smiles, caught.

"I'm telling you: she's just trouble, nothing but trouble." Here Coach looks down and shakes his head with mock solemnity, and we laugh and make appropriate obscene comments. (But a month later, after Les bombs a race, Coach castigates him viciously and warns him to "stop screwing that blond.") He finally tells us to jog the course as a group to warm up. Ten minutes later we are back at the entrance.

"Is everyone ready?"

We nod reluctantly. What we would really like to do is postpone this workout indefinitely.

"Get out of your sweats. Let's go."

The middle third of the mile-and-a-half-long hill-zipper course is a quarter-mile-long uphill followed by a quarter-mile-long descent. We run it as a group for the first half-mile, then Monster—healthy now—pushes it up the hill, and we string out. Everyone finishes between 7:50 and 8:20. Breathing hard, we huddle around Coach, who asks us to take our own pulses while he clocks off fifteen seconds. When everyone's pulse is below 100 per minute, which usually takes three or four minutes, he starts us off again. We do this four times, and the workout is over. It takes less than an hour. A very high pain/minute ratio.

After we finish, we again surround Coach, who invariably expounds on one of his favorite subjects in his characteristic manner, didactic and uncompromising. He is an intense man. He looks directly at each one of us and enunciates very clearly, pinching his right thumb and forefinger together in front of him when he's emphasizing a point. Although we've heard variations of this talk before, we are enthralled. The man is a motivator. On days when he shows up late in the middle of a hill-zipper workout, the next one is always the fastest. We want to impress him as if we're his own children.

His talks vary in details, but they emphasize the same themes. Coping with pressure. Accepting pain as a part of any worthwhile endeavor. Sacrificing to accomplish personal goals. We know he speaks from experience. He put himself through college on a track scholarship, and he continued to run while he was in medical school and later becoming a respected plastic surgeon. During this time he and his wife have raised four children, two already teenagers. He is on all accounts a successful man, and he's done it

without special privilege. Nevertheless, he's telling me things I don't want to hear. As much as I like him and crave his attention, I resent his prescribing my life for me. I am young and sure of myself, and no one can tell me how to live my life.

We have our differences. I am what is known in running as a "head case." I have good ability, but I lack the single-minded dedication and what he calls "mental toughness" to run up to my ability consistently. I am erratic, and he doesn't understand. Or may be he understands and knows he can't help. This is also the era of questioning and contention—the backwash of the '60s—and I feel the tug of the wave. When I am not brash and assertive, I am sullen and withdrawn. My moodiness is foreign to him. He is a man oblivious of the times, consumed by his work, his family, his team.

Despite our differences, though, we like each other. I can't help myself: I like the man. I may dispute everything he tells us, but I scramble for his attention with everyone else on the team. He and Les have a relationship that is like father to son, and I am jealous. I wish he knew enough about me to tease me about my girlfriend. I wish I would let him.

There is always a distance between us, a field of force. So we circle each other tentatively, wanting to touch but unable to.

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Certain incidents come to mind often. They might be diagnostic.

Coach is driving us out of town to the park for the first time. We have known him for a day. We turn onto a busy two-laned road near campus. While we nod agreeably, Coach tells us, “This is the only road in town you need to know. This road goes everywhere. Just remember that.” We are freshmen; we believe him. For the next four years, long after we know better, this road, Woodlawn on maps, is known to us only as “The Road That Goes Everywhere.”

We are driving back to Nashville from Oxford, Mississippi. We have just run poorly and lost a dual meet. As is his custom, Coach is driving and reviewing our mile splits and final times. For all of us this ritual is today a public confession of guilt.

“What did Jeff run?”

Monster has the official score sheet and is reading the times aloud.

“24:07.”

“24:07?”

“Uh-huh.”

“24:07? My God, that time would make the top seven on the Whippets.”

We giggle. The Whippets are junior high school girls’ team he and his wife coach.

“Are you sick, Jeff?”

Jeff is contrite and eager to admit his failing. “No, Coach. I just ran poorly today.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, Coach.”

“Mental problems?”

"I don't think so. I just didn't have it today."

"Girlfriend problems?"

"No, Coach."

"Are you sleeping enough?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Jeff."

"Yeah, Coach."

"I don't think you hurt enough out there today."

We are in front of the athletic center, absorbing disapproving stares from football players—they're thinking, "What are these skinny little farts doing here?"—while we wait for Coach. He is even later than usual, and we have a meet today with our cross-town rival. We begin to worry. We have no other means of transportation. We discuss jogging over to their campus, but it's five miles away. Finally his Vega rounds the corner and hurries to the curb. We cram in. He is wearing his operating-room scrubs.

"I won't be able to make it to the meet today," he tells us. "You'll have to take the car and drop me off back at the hospital. I left a patient on the table."

We are driving back from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Jeff and I are sitting in the cargo seat of the rented station wagon, facing backward. Coach is driving and lecturing extemporaneously, oblivious of everything except the point he's trying to make. We hear a loud pop, and the car veers toward the shoulder of the interstate. Coach doesn't notice

at first, then comments that the car doesn't seem to handle very well. We are quiet for a minute before Jeff offers, "Coach, I think we just had a blowout."

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We are at the park out of town. It is late afternoon of a late October day, and sunlight flows down the face of the hill. We are finishing a figure 8 workout—much like a zipper workout, except that we climb this hill twice during each mile-and-a-half repeat.

Because Coach must drive us to the park, we run these on days when he can run with us. He and Monster, Jeff, and Caldwell usually finish together. On the last figure 8 today, however, Monster has worn down everyone and is by himself at the top of the last hill, fifty yards ahead of Jeff and Caldwell. Coach is lagging another twenty yards behind. The course cuts down through some woods before finishing on a three-hundred-yard-long grassy flat. Coming out of the woods, Monster has a comfortable lead, but Coach will not let him rest. Driving furiously, he passes Jeff and Caldwell and closes in. Monster hears him coming but can't check the assault, and Coach blows by him fifty yards from the finish.

It is a display designed to impress us, as it does. We often run these workouts as hard as meets. Although we like each other, competition among teammates is intense. Each of us wants to establish our position on the team, and the only way to do that is to beat other people consistently, in practice as well as in races. Respect is always earned.

He knows this, too. He knows that if he is to make a difference, we must respect him, we must know that he is capable of enduring what he asks us to endure.

Another day we visit him at his office, where he shows us a series of photographs of one of his patients, a man whose jaw was crushed in an industrial accident. He is reconstructing the man's entire lower face, grafting bone, nerve, muscle, and skin. It is a gruesome job, but one he seems to relish. He doesn't shy from pain, in himself or in others. For him pain is a part of living: not something to avoid, but something to confront, overcome, succeed in spite of.

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It's taken me a long time to understand him. He was a small man, even for a runner, a short, wiry man who resembled a diminutive Neanderthal, with a gaunt face, a firm jaw, and a laconic demeanor. He enjoyed coaching us, I know that now, although his tenure as our coach was filled with disappointment. He had a subtle sense of humor, and often his serious talks would degenerate into ludicrous exaggeration before we quite realized it. Still, he was at heart a serious man, a driven man, and he expected us to be the same.

He was a respected plastic surgeon, a husband and father, coach of two teams, and in better shape at forty than most of us at twenty. He was a busy man, always speeding up to our practices late, but always there. We were important to him, I know that now, although at the time it seemed only that he was important to us.

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November 9, 1974. We are at a thoroughbred horse farm outside of Lexington, Kentucky, for the conference meet. The air is warm and dense, and dew soaks our feet and soft ground dampens our steps as we follow a white lime stripe across grassy pastures. A few minutes ago, an hour before race, a large crowd was already milling around the finish line. We decided then to job the course to see the terrain, avoid the people, and compose ourselves for the race.

We drove to Lexington yesterday afternoon by ourselves. Coach made the motel reservations, gave us travel money, and told us he'd be up as soon as he could get away. He still isn't here. We're beginning to think he won't show up, which discourages us, so we don't talk about it. As we jog, we say very little, speaking when we do in quiet, serious voices, and when we pass other teams on the course, we ignore them. Even Les and Caldwell, normally the most animated, are subdued, morose even.

We want to do well today, need to. A team's reputation is based in no small measure on its performance in the conference meet. Teams that do well here are respected; teams that do poorly are snickered at. We have a respectable team and have done well in our dual meets, but we have a bad reputation to fight here. The last two years we have bombed the conference, and history bears down on us. We feel its pressure.

Although he never mentions it, Coach has also suffered from our ignominious performances here. As unfair as it may be, his reputation as a coach rides with ours as a team. We would like to vindicate him today.

We discuss strategy. Those of us who have no hope of going out with the elite front-runners and staying with them through the race have two options: We can go out at the front of the main pack, which is still too fast, and hope we can hang onto our places during the latter half of the race; or we can go out at the back of the main pack, at a reasonable pace, and hope we can move up steadily after the first mile. None of us expects to finish in the top ten today, and, except for Monster, who always goes out fast, we all favor running from the back.

We head toward the starting line. In the distance a man announces through a PA system that we have fifteen minutes until the start. As we pass the finish area, a man calls to us. It is Coach. I am relieved he's here, but fifteen minutes before the biggest race of the year I can't afford to divert my attention from the task at hand. As soon as I see him, though, I feel a surge of adrenaline. I try not to become too excited. In a five-mile-long cross-country race all energy—physical and psychological—must be invested in the race itself. Les asks him why he's late, and his answer implies that he drove up last night and stayed at the same motel where we stayed but didn't try to contact us. We wait for him to explain, but he says nothing more. His reticence troubles me. (I believe now he deliberately avoided us. He knew then, as we didn't, that this would our last race with him as our coach. In his own peculiar way he was preparing us for the separation.)

He accompanies us to the starting line, a quarter-mile away. My arms and legs feel heavy, but I tell myself they'll lighten with the start. Through a megaphone the starter asks us to report to the area assigned to our team. We strip off our sweats, Coach nods to us silently, and we go to the line. We are on our own now. We stride out on the course forty of fifty yards—a mock start—then regroup behind the line and, to reassure ourselves, shake hands, touch, and wish each other heartfelt good luck.

"C'mon, Robbie, let's run tough."

"Yeah, you too, Lester."

"Let's do it, Monster."

The starter calls us to the mark. We settle down, take a stance. He calls, "Runners set." We lean forward, poised. Then—suddenly—he fires the gun, and we're off.

The start of the conference meet is idiotically fast. The early leader, who is almost never the winner, goes through the first mile in about 4:30. It is a hare-brained chase for the first mile. I try to control my pace, to just hang onto the main pack. My legs are still heavy and my arms tight, and the humidity bothers me. I go through the first mile in 5:07, when the effort feels like 4:50. I'm exactly where I want to be, at the back of the main pack, but I don't feel confident about moving up. During the second mile I have to start making my move, but my legs are tight and my arms tingle with fatigue. I drop my arms to my side, trying to loosen them, but I feel only a great weight hanging from my shoulders. The main pack begins to pull away. I curse myself. At the three-mile mark, when the split time doesn't register in my head (so different is it from what I expected), I give up the chase. Nevertheless, I refuse to drop out. Even if I walk, I'm determined to

finish, to cross the line with all those people watching with embarrassment and amusement this pathetic, bedraggled straggler. This is my penance.

My teammates haven't done much better than I. It is as if we are all afflicted by the same disease. We are cursed and doomed. Coach watches the finish, turns, and walks away by himself. He is disappointed and hurt. He drives home alone. We'll see him only once more.

We should wait and attend the awards banquet this afternoon, but we don't have the heart for it. We drive back to the motel, shower quickly, and leave Lexington as soon as we can.

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It is later now. Weeks? No. Years. For professional reasons Coach moved out of town early in 1975, and a move later I lost track of him. The university eventually hired a full-time coach, and practices changes and new faces appeared. Les, Jeff, and I were seniors the following year, but our senior season wasn't what it should have been. We had lost something vital, the joy had gone out of it. We graduated in turn and went our own ways, and that was long ago already.

I don't know where the time went.

I wish I could find our coach and thank him for what he taught us. We were so young and self-absorbed.

I'm running alone now the trails in the park we used to run on Sunday mornings. I struggle slowly to the junction at the top of the three-mile hill and pause, surveying the wooded landscape. The day is very still. Behind me, fifty yards down the trail, I hear labored breathing and the clatter of loose rocks under heavy footsteps. I turn and watch a middle-aged man lead a pack of ragged adolescents, sweating and straining, up the hill. At the spot where I am standing, they too pause. There is talking and laughter. The man stands in the middle of the group, distracted and strangely silent; but after a minute he looks at the boys around him and seems to smile.

It is a dream I have often.

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