

Eddie, The Early Years

Chapter One The Race

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Eddie was born into a family of second generation Americans. His grandparents came over from Eastern Europe with little more than a suitcase and the clothes on their back. Although Eddie's grandparents work hard, they have very little to show for it. Eddie's father also works hard and has a little bit more to show for his labor. There is always good food on the table, and time for Eddie's parents and grandparents to spend with Eddie. Since Eddie's family doesn't have much, anything that Eddie has is highly valued.

Eddie's father, Dominik, is employed as a jobber. A jobber is someone who can do just about anything having to deal with construction or mechanical things. Simply put, a jobber is someone who is hired to do a specific job, completes it, and moves onto the next job. Although Dominik does not have a fancy job title, he is very much in demand for his broad range of skills. Having work lined up for weeks in advance, he always has enough to keep him busy.

Since Eddie does not have a lot of "stuff," he spends much of his time in other ways. Eddie likes riding his bicycle, playing football with the older kids, or swimming in the county pool. Eddie can run faster than most of the older kids, so they let him join their football games after school. They all play on a field that is a few blocks over, so getting there is easy for Eddie. When they throw the ball to Eddie, he takes off like a lightning bolt toward the goal line. At ten years old, Eddie was able to outrun his father. At twelve years old, Eddie was pushing a lawnmower, cutting the neighbor's lawns for exercise and profit. Now, at fourteen years old, Eddie is the middle school track star.

After school, while the other kids are watching TV or just hanging out, Eddie is usually found riding his bicycle. Riding with one or two of his friends who are able to keep up for the ten or fifteen miles, Eddie gets

quite a bit of exercise. On the weekends, Eddie rides quite a bit farther, perhaps to the beach, the mall, or just around town. On a rainy day, Eddie typically works on his bicycle and works out. He would repack the wheel bearings, true up the wheels, or perform other maintenance, fine tuning his mechanical masterpiece that he built from scratch. While he is thinking of other ways to improve his bicycle, Eddie works out with weights, which are set up next to the workbench in the basement. Occasionally, some homework might even get done between exercises.

Eddie is highly mechanically inclined. If it were mechanical and broken, Eddie is somehow able to fix it. He often makes improvements to anything mechanical whenever he can. At fourteen years old, Eddie is already able to change the oil in his father's car. Learning from his uncle, who lives down the street, and from his father, Eddie is also able to tune up an automobile engine. Eddie's uncle, who is employed as an airplane mechanic, would watch as Eddie works on a car, giving Eddie as little supervision as he could. Eddie's uncle always encourages him to figure things out for himself. Giving Eddie some words of wisdom, his uncle repeatedly says, "if you can't fix it, you'll have to pay somebody to fix it."

Eddie is the fastest guy in the middle school, well, except for a guy named Mark. Both Eddie and Mark train equally hard, but are totally unaware they are even training. Their training consists of activities they enjoy doing. Both eat well, primarily because their parents grow much of their own food and shop at the farmers market instead of grocery stores. Eddie and Mark both always give the proverbial 110 percent, if more than 100 percent is even possible, all in the spirit of having fun. Eddie and Mark excel at just about any sport they venture to play. Although they are teammates, some sort of synergistic competition always exists between Mark and Eddie.

Mark, like Eddie, cannot be found anywhere near a television. This is because a television set can't be found anywhere in Mark's home. Having no television gives Mark much more time to do other things, such as working out and running. Mark proudly wears a T-shirt in gym class, quite fitting with the words "Muscle Man of the Year", which he had made at a local T-shirt shop. Unlike Eddie, who bicycles everywhere, Mark prefers to walk or run anywhere he goes. The good news is that the county pool is only a mile away from his home. The short run is a small price to pay to cool down on a hot Summer's day. Although swimming laps in the pool is yet another way to work out, Mark thinks of it more as having fun rather than a workout.

Mark has a slight bit of an advantage in the sports arena primarily because he is a year older than everyone else in the eighth grade. Mark's mother missed the deadline for kindergarten registration years back. Mark's parents, originally from Czechoslovakia, are first generation

Americans. English is not Mark's mother's first language, so something must have gotten lost in the translation regarding the registration date. The year delay gave Mark an extra year of riding his bicycle, running around, and playing in the woods. Sitting in a classroom, drawing pictures destined to decorate the refrigerator, was delayed for a year.

Mark's father, Joseph, is also employed as a jobber. Mark's and Eddie's fathers occasionally work on jobs together. While Eddie's father works mostly on commercial construction and mechanical items, Mark's father works mostly on residential and light commercial construction. Mark, learning from his father, is on his way to becoming a master of home repair at the age of fifteen. Mark is able to replace siding, frame a structure, do electrical and plumbing repairs, and even paint without making a mess. During Summer vacation, Mark's father occasionally takes Mark along on a job, giving him the heavy work to do. Even when carrying a tool box, Mark will often do curls to build up his biceps, or shrugs to build up his Trapezius muscles. Mark's father pays Mark for the work he actually does, not by the number of hours he puts in.

Mark and Eddie are, at best, average in school. Not surprisingly, gym class is their best subject. They are always picked at the top when choosing teams. Occasionally, they will be on the same team, which usually meant a disaster for the opponents. In eighth grade, there is a period known as study hall, where the students go to the library and study, or sit and do homework in the lunch room. During eighth grade study hall, not surprisingly, Mark and Eddie return to the gym for an extra period of gym class.

Eddie and Mark already have the skills that could earn them a living in the marketplace. School is the prescribed path to get a better job someday. That is the hope and dream of immigrants, to get a better life through a better job. A better life comes through hard work, both in school and at work. Sitting around and being lazy is not an option in Mark's and Eddie's homes.

At lunchtime, Mark and Eddie are seemingly the CEO and CFO of the daily game of Kill the Man with the Ball. Played by the usual 40 or so mixture of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, only the fast and tough guys survive. Others will quickly become part of the turf should they dare to stray from the library or lunchroom. Being in eighth grade, and proudly at the top of the middle school food chain, Eddie and Mark are untouchable.

The story line usually follows the same script. Mark, being chased down by the pack, throws the ball to Eddie, who runs for a while, only to return the ball to Mark once the pack gets close. Just to keep things interesting, occasionally Mark or Eddie will throw the ball to some

unsuspecting newcomer to the game. Without a moment's notice, the new guy on the block gets a quick lesson in Rugby etiquette. Not surprisingly, a few of the other track team members also excel at this game. A vague rule seems to exist among the track team not to take down another team member.

Today, there is no game of Kill the Man with the Ball for either Mark or Eddie. After school today is the last track meet of the year and Mr. Harris, the coach, does not want the team expending any unnecessary energy on such meaningless lunchtime endeavors. Mr. Harris also has a habit of frequenting the lunchroom on the day of a meet. He makes sure the team is not eating anything that will later interfere with their performance. If Mr. Harris sees French Fries on a track team member's lunch tray, he will take them back to the lunch line and bring them something more healthy to eat. Occasionally, Mr. Harris will stand behind the lunch line and, when a team member moves through the line, he will make sure they choose a healthy lunch. With Mr. Harris, losing a meet is not an option.

Hanging out against the brick wall, Mark, Eddie, and a few other track buddies watch today's session of Kill the Man with the Ball. "It looks like Tim's having a good run," expresses Mark, with great surprise. After a long pause, Eddie replies, "Gump's going to blind side him. Watch this. Here comes the takedown." Tim takes a wide right turn, and coming around the side of the pack to cut him off is Daniel Gaspari. Daniel, also known as Gump to his closest friends, is an outside linebacker on the football team and a wrestler. Gump is not exactly the guy you'd want to have take you down.

Gump, seemingly coming out of nowhere, plows into Tim like a fully loaded dump truck running into a shopping cart. As the ball comes loose, Gump wrestles for it and takes off. The pack takes off chasing Gump, leaving Tim mangled and face down in the grass to meditate for a while. "That didn't end too well for Tim," says Mark, laughing along with Eddie. Neither Mark nor Eddie would ever go down like that, for they are too fast for anyone to catch. If it ever looked like they were going down, they quickly toss the ball to someone else, and let them take the hit.

With the track meet three hours away, it's back to class for Mark and Eddie. Neither will pay too much attention to anything said in the classroom for the rest of the day. Their mind is on the meet, where it perhaps should be. Health class is right after lunch, so it is a class that Eddie and Mark can coast through. Mark and Eddie stop by their lockers to pick up a few books before they head to class. Sitting in class will give them some well needed rest before today's track meet later in the afternoon.

In health class today, the topic is illicit drugs, and why you should not take them. The topic of drugs is in the syllabus by no accident. Next year, Mark, Eddie, and the rest of the class will be in high school where drugs are commonplace, especially in this school district. Mr. Coleman, the instructor, is describing the types of illicit drugs, the effects of each drug, the dangers, and why you should not take them. In his lecture, Mr. Coleman mentions, "by the time you graduate from high school, statistically 25 percent of you will have tried marijuana at least once." Mr. Coleman's job is to discourage such activity among the students.

Eddie, rarely participating in class discussions, thinks about what Mr. Coleman said for a moment, and raises his hand. Mr. Coleman is quite surprised to see that Eddie is actually participating in class. Mr. Coleman also displays some enthusiasm that anyone is even paying attention to his lecture. Pointing to Eddie, Mr. Coleman asks, "yes, Eddie. Do you have a question?" "Yeah," Eddie responds, "if 25 percent of us are going to try pot, does that mean 25 percent of the teachers in this school have tried it too?" The class bursts out laughing, quickly followed by an uproar of the typical student chatter.

While Mr. Coleman hopelessly tries to get the class under control, students are heard commenting to each other, "how about Mr. Otto?" "Miss Brown, I bet she's tried it!" "Oh, yeah! And, Miss Knox," comments one student, with another responding, "oh, for sure! You know she's done it!" After about ten minutes, order is somewhat restored but, by then, the class is over. The bell rings, and the students move on to the next class. The rest of the school day is less eventful, except for, perhaps, the story Eddie gave Mr. Coleman to tell later today in the teacher's lounge.

Mark and Eddie both know that Mr. George Frazier, the high school track coach, will be attending today's track meet. Mr. Frazier will be scouting the talent that he will inherit for next year's track season. Today's meet will be held on the track that encircles the Kill the Man with the Ball field, commonly known to everyone else as the football field. This is Mark and Eddie's track. No one comes anywhere near Mark and Eddie's track and wins. It is also well known that, with Mr. Frazier, the person coming in second place is the first loser. Today, with Mr. Frazier standing aside Mr. Harris, winning, and winning big, is the only thing that matters. Centerville Middle School, the opposing team, is a formidable opponent this year. If the pressure was ever on, it is today.

As the final bell of the school day rings, classrooms empty into the halls, lockers slam shut, and many students are headed to the doors. Some students get on their busses to go home. A few students walk home. Others stay around for some after school activities. Today,

however, is a little different. A large group of students, mostly the athletic guys and girls, is headed out to the track to watch today's meet.

Some parents are already standing along the track, waiting for the competition to begin. Everyone knows what is going down on the track this afternoon. Eddie and Mark will be competing head to head in the 100-yard dash. They will not only be racing head to head, but they will be up against one of the fastest guys in middle school in the county. And, knowing that Mr. Frazier will be at the meet, everyone expects a highly competitive afternoon.

Mark, Eddie, and a few of their track buddies, head down the hall to the locker room. Many members of the team are excited about the meet, while others are nervous and apprehensive. If Mr. Frazier were not attending the meet today, a more relaxed atmosphere would be felt, especially among the students who will be entering high school next year. Mr. Frazier's presence, however, will probably motivate the team to perform better than they normally would.

Gary Mitchell, the school's five-star distance runner, appears to be a little nervous today. Gary will be running the mile in today's meet. He will be competing against some twig of a guy who looks like his lower body was stretched on a rack or something. The twig slightly edged out Gary in a cross country meet this past Autumn. Gary is not about to let that guy beat him a second time. Standing about five feet, eight inches tall, Gary has a body fat measurement in the single digit numbers. By not carrying any extra weight at all, Gary is able to move his body the entire mile with great speed and efficiency.

Eric Johnson, running the 220-yard dash today, is acting like he already has his race wrapped up. Johnson, who may not have delivered the best times this year on the track, is nevertheless a brilliant runner. Johnson will typically run only as fast as he needs in order to win the race. Running distances from short sprints to 880 yards, Johnson is not someone to underestimate. Johnson's greatest strength is the ability to sprint for 110 yards at nearly his top speed at the end of a race. This makes him well suited for the 220-yard dash, the 440-yard run, or the half mile.

Axel Braden, with his usual optimism, reassures the group, "we are gonna kick ass! Kick ass! That's what we're gonna do! Kick their flimsy asses! This is gonna be the biggest ass kicking of the year!" Braden, who will be running the 440-yard run today, has great cause for optimism. Braden's consistent sub-60 second quarter mile is virtually a one man race. No one seems to know Braden's limits. It is not even known whether Braden knows his own limits. It seems that, when Braden's brain commands his body to perform, it performs, and performs well.

Robert Bradshaw, also known as the doctor of the shot-put or Bobby B., is not worried at all. Standing about six feet tall, and weighing more than 200 pounds, Bradshaw tosses the shot-put around as easily as most people would toss around a baseball. It's rarely a discussion of whether Bobby B. will win the shot-put event. The real question is by how much he wins. Bradshaw has not lost his event all year, and is not about to start today.

Mark and Eddie are eerily and unusually quiet today. They will be up against some square-jawed guy who looks like an old Rock 'em Sock 'em Robot from the early 1970s. The robot, who gave them a run for their money last year, had to settle for third place, and is not about to let that happen again this year. It's a sure bet that the robot is not going to settle for anything less than first place today. Eddie will also not settle for anything less than first place either. Neither will Mark. The competition between these three runners is what will make the 100-yard dash the main event at this afternoon's meet.

Before the meet, the team members congregate in the hallway near the door to the locker room. One guy mentions something about perfect weather. That is encouraging, since no one wants to run in extreme heat or cold, or in the rain. Eric Johnson pulls out an apple, and starts eating it to get his carbohydrate levels up. Since everyone was sitting in class all day, a few of the athletes begin stretching. The chit chat eventually dies down, and the team heads into the locker room.

While they are dressing, some guy named Jimmy O'Brien, informs Mark, "I hear their fast guy runs a 10.5 in the one hundred." "Shut up, junior," replies Mark, immediately shutting down any further conversation. Mark is not interested in listening to that kind of encouraging bullshit right now. Jimmy O'Brien is only on the track team because his father is a social studies teacher in the high school. The team would probably be better off without O'Brien, who hasn't won a race all year, and probably never will.

Quite the opposite of Jimmy O'Brien is Axel Braden. With his one-track mind, Braden continues reassuring everyone, "we're gonna kick ass today! We're gonna win every event! Ain't no one stopping us!" Braden, who is always very optimistic, could easily double as a one man cheerleader for the team. If you ask Braden, he will tell you that he has already won his events, and that the team has already won the meet.

"Listen up," coach Harris yells through the locker room, "everyone in the gym in five minutes." In five minutes, the coach will announce the lineup and give the team any inside information he may know about the opponent. Any inside information doesn't matter much to Mark or Eddie. They already know exactly who they are up against. And, as for Gary

Mitchell, he's not about to let that six-foot six-inch tooth pick beat him again. And, Robert Bradshaw is not concerned about his competition. Bradshaw's competition is concerned about him.

Almost like an afterthought, Coach Harris reminds the team, "and please remember to take your spikes off before you walk into the gym. Spikes on a wooden gym floor don't mix." The team knows this quite well, for they are reminded to take their spikes off when entering the gym before every practice and every meet. A few years ago, several sprinters walked across the gym floor wearing spikes. This made the gym appear like someone drove a lawn aerator across the floor in circles. For some odd reason, the damage done to the gym floor irritated the basketball coach.

The team, seated on the bleachers, looks to the left as Mr. Harris walks in. "This is the most important meet of the year," the coach declares to the team for at least the fifth time today. Reading from his clipboard, Mr. Harris announces the line up. Everyone has two events, their main event, and another event that may change from meet to meet. "Mitchell, Livingston, and Ford, you're running the mile," announces Mr. Harris with obvious pride. "Braden, Hill, Davis, and O'Brien, the 440," Mr. Harris notifies the team. The pontification drags on, with everyone in a daze of sorts until they hear their own name. "Mark, Eddie, and Hoffer, the 100-yard dash," announces Mr. Harris, which is no surprise to anyone. Next year, Jimmy Hoffer, who looks very promising, will be on his own in the 100-yard dash.

Staring out into space, Mark and Eddie hear their name again a minute or so later, both missing entirely the event that Mr. Harris announced. Eddie, still in a daze, pipes up and says, "who?" "You, and the same 4 by 440 relay team as the last meet, and every meet before that," replies Mr. Harris, who didn't seem too annoyed, understanding the pressure the team is under. "Okay! Everyone up, and we all walk out together," insists Mr. Harris, smiling as if he knows something the team does not.

Moving out from the gym into the hall, the team heads out the door. The sprinters sit on the retaining wall, and put on their spikes. They will be the last ones to get out to the track. Mark and Eddie will be up in the 100-yard dash, which is right after the 100-yard hurdles. The first event, the 100-yard hurdles, is an event that does not interest Eddie or Mark at all. No one really wants to run the hurdles. A race that is usually reserved for newbies, the 100-yard hurdles is some sort of rite of initiation to join the team. Once they get their shoes on, Mark, Eddie, and Hoffer head to the starting line, standing aside as the hurdlers fumble with the starting blocks as if they've never seen them before.

Since this is a middle school track meet, today's meet is managed by five Timekeepers and one Field Judge. A track meet is usually coordinated by several officials¹, who are the Meet Director, Meet Announcer, Starter, Lane Judges, Field Judges, Head Timekeeper, and Timekeepers. Running today's meet, the Head Timekeeper gets the awesome responsibility of serving as the Meet Director, Meet Announcer, and Timekeeper. The Head Timekeeper meets with the coaches to go over the schedule of events. This formality only takes a minute or two, as everyone has been through the same procedure all season. Wasting no time, the Head Timekeeper then instructs the coaches to have their teams prepare to run the 100-yard hurdles.

Mark spots the square-jawed Rock 'em Sock 'em Robot standing off to the side of the track, walking back and forth nervously looking at the ground. "There he is. He looks worried," Mark whispers to Eddie. Eddie confidently replies, "good. Let him look worried. He should be worried." Eddie, who spotted his opponent a little earlier, tells Mark, "he'll burn himself out worrying before the race. He's already checked his laces at least a dozen times." After hearing Eddie's comment, a big grin comes across Mark's face. Mark is now thinking of a plan to throw the square-jawed nervous wreck off base right before the race.

The hurdlers are set and ready to run, but Mark and Eddie pay no attention. As the gun goes off, the sound of spikes grinding into gravel announces the beginning of today's track meet. The hurdlers are gone. Now it's down to the real business.

Paying absolutely no attention to who won the hurdles, Mark and Eddie walk onto the track. Eddie, checking the roster posted on the music stand borrowed from the band room, is in lane three. Next to him, in lane four, is Mark. The square-jawed guy, still checking his laces every minute or so, is in lane five. Mark points to square-jawed's shoes, and says to Eddie, "let's psych him before the race." Eddie replies laughing, "yeah. Tell him that his shoe laces are untied right before the gun goes off." Mark, who will have to do the dirty work since square-jaw is in the lane next to him, agrees.

Mark and Eddie adjust their blocks, which takes them just a few seconds. After doing some last minute stretching, Mark and Eddie are as ready as ever for the race to begin. The squared-jawed guy, in the mean time, is endlessly checking his shoe laces, and adjusting his blocks. Looking down the track, Eddie sees the track lined with a few dozen spectators on each side, with more headed toward the area. Eddie

¹ See Appendix I.

wonders where they all came from. After all, this is a middle school track meet, not the Olympics.

Eddie looks over at Mark who, like Eddie, appears quite confident. Eddie mentions to Mark, "it looks like we have a big audience today." Mark points out to Eddie, "and, there's Mr. Frazier, standing at the finish line." Eddie replies, "I saw him walk over to Mr. Harris right before the hurdles. He looked pretty serious." Knowing that Mr. Frazier is standing at the finish line, this should be Eddie's and Mark's best race of the year.

"On your marks," announces the Starter. This is it, the big moment. Time appears to slow down, as Mark, Eddie, and the others, walk up from behind their blocks and position themselves as they have done many times before. After getting positioned in the blocks, Mark looks over at the squared-jaw guy positioning himself in the blocks. Mark motions vaguely to the blocks and his shoes, and authoritatively says to the square-jawed guy, "you may want to fix that," leaving incredible uncertainty as to what may be the problem. Eddie laughs under his breath, whispering to himself, "that was a really good one." No one else has a clue about what just transpired.

"Set," the magic word from the Starter that gets the adrenaline flowing, is heard by all. The square-jawed guy, still examining his shoes and blocks, is thrown a little off base. The goal was clearly accomplished by Mark in the distraction department. Time appears to stand still to the runners, as dead silence surrounds the track. The runners all get set. Once they are motionless and ready, the Starter will pull the trigger. Everyone, including the spectators, is ready, except for, perhaps, the square-jawed guy who is still examining his shoes and blocks.

Mr. Frazier, the high school track coach, is also ready at the finish line with his own stopwatch. Mr. Frazier, who almost qualified for the Olympics in the 100-meter dash about a decade ago, not only looks at how fast you run, but also looks at how you run. He is every bit as set as the runners.

About ten yards in front of the runners, the Starter raises the gun into the air with his finger on the trigger. Another official, with his own gun, is lined up with the runners and will be checking for any false start. No one wants to hear the sound of the second gun, signifying a false start. With their heads facing forward, Mark and Eddie have their eyes to the left on the Starter's finger. Mark and Eddie are not stupid. They are masters at anticipating the gun. They both know that the Starter should have the gun out of view behind his back. When the Starter's finger shows the slightest movement, they will set their eyes forward and take off.

When the Starter's finger on the trigger begins to move, Mark and Eddie fix their gaze forward. Just as the sound of the gun startles everyone, Mark and Eddie are out of the blocks a split second before anyone else. Mark and Eddie, already leading the pack ten yards into the race, both know that they are on track for their best performance of the year. The square-jawed Rock 'em Sock 'em Robot is embarrassingly in fourth place shortly after leaving the blocks. Perhaps Mark's comment caused a lot more distress than originally expected.

Eddie, pouring on the power, takes a slight lead over Mark. At about 40 yards into the race, two groups clearly emerge. Mark and Eddie are in the first group. Led by Hoffer, the others, who are five yards behind, are in the second group. At the fifty-yard line, the second group is now marginally being lead by the square-jawed guy. By sixty yards, barring some unforeseen circumstances, first and second place are already locked in.

Now in a two-man race, Mark and Eddie are head to head. No one else stands a chance to catch them. The spectators are all watching intently, many of them realizing the level of competition is not that of your typical middle school track meet. It is difficult for anyone to tell whether Mark or Eddie is ahead. Neither can the two runners, who, by now, are running faster than they ever have before.

With twenty yards left, Mark and Eddie are still head to head. Neither Mark nor Eddie exhibits any signs of slowing their pace. As the cheering gets louder, the finish line draws nearer and nearer. With ten yards remaining, Mark may have a quarter step advantage, which is quickly eroded away as the two runners approach the finish line. Both Eddie and Mark begin the lean forward two or three yards before the finish. In a flash, they both cross the finish line. A second later, the Rock 'em Sock 'em Robot crosses the finish line. The robot is quickly followed by Hoffer, who is followed by the rest of the pack.

The words, "Mark or Eddie," can be heard everywhere in the crowd. "Eddie won," is heard from some, yet others say, "no, Mark won!" One of the football players watching the race was heard boasting, "those two guys run like machines!" Mr. Frazier, the high school coach, does not care who won. Mr. Frazier, who cannot contain his excitement, keeps exclaiming with a big grin on his face, "that was a 10.1 hundred, a 10.1! Can you believe it? These guys are fast!"

This race was not a bad performance for a fourteen and fifteen-year-old. The Timekeepers and the coaches could not discern a clear winner of the race. All watches recorded the same time, which is 10.1 seconds. Silence emerges, as the officials walk off to the side, and have a

discussion among themselves. Everyone wonders what the officials may be discussing that could be taking so long.

Wandering away from the crowd, Eddie is more intent on finding a bottle of water or some Gatorade than listening to the results. Eddie makes his way to the refreshment table, which is set up near the field events area. Eddie downs a few cups of water and a cup of Gatorade. Eddie then talks briefly with Robert Bradshaw, also known as Bobby B., the doctor of the shot-put. True to form, it looks like Bobby B. has already locked up first place with his first attempt today.

The shot doc asks Eddie, “who won the 100-yard dash?” Eddie replies, “I don’t know. It’s hard to tell.” Bobby B. asks, “you don’t know? How can you not know?” Giving the best answer he has at the moment, Eddie replies, “it was close, really close. The officials are talking about it now.” Eddie then wanders back to the crowd, telling the shot doc, “I’ll let you know. I’m going to go and find out now.”

After cooling down by walking out in the field, Mark stands near the finish line waiting for the news of who won. Mark is exuberant by his 10.1 second time, of which he was informed by Mr. Harris. Mark has reason for celebration because 10.4 seconds was his previous best time in competition. Mark, like everyone else, still does not know whether he won or Eddie won.

At the finish line, the announcement finally comes. “In third place, with a time of 11.3 seconds, Todd McCutchen,” announces the Head Timekeeper, which is a big surprise to everyone. That time represents McCutchen’s worst official run of the season. The Head Timekeeper, revealing what everyone has been waiting for, announces to the crowd, “and, we have a tie for first place. With a time of 10.1 seconds, the winners are Mark Svoboda and Edward Bogenskaya.” A lot of cheering is heard, amongst some heated discussion among some who think Eddie won, and some who think Mark won.

Mr. Frazier instructs his assistant, a blonde haired athletic-looking high school girl, to write the names of the winners on her clipboard. He also instructs her to write down their times. Mr. Frazier is taking notes, or rather the high school student helping him today is taking notes for him. Mr. Frazier will find Mark and Eddie one way or another next year when they are in high school. Mr. Frazier is unwilling to let any potential talent escape, especially two athletes who can run 100 yards in 10.1 seconds.

While the runners get ready for the 4 by 220 relay, Eddie makes his way back to the finish line. Eddie is totally unaware of his official time and that the race was a tie. Before Eddie gets back to the crowd, he gets

some good news from a 25-year-old guy in a mechanic's uniform. The mechanic, who came to watch the meet, looks as if he just left the garage, spending the day rebuilding an engine. Eddie is fairly certain that he's never seen the mechanic before.

The mechanic tells Eddie, "it was a tie. You ran a 10.1. Great job!" With his mind elsewhere, not even fully comprehending what the mechanic said to him, Eddie replies, "hey, thanks! That was my personal record!" The mechanic tells Eddie, "good luck in the 4 by 440 relay later." Eddie replies, "thanks! I think we're going to win." Eddie wonders why a mechanic showed up for the meet, thinking that he is probably somebody's friend. As Eddie walks back to the starting line, he wonders how the mechanic knew he was running in a relay race later in the meet. The mechanic looks over at Mr. Frazier and his student assistant, and then walks away.

Walking up to the crowd, Eddie gives Mark and a few others a high-five. Mr. Harris and Mr. Frazier congratulate Eddie. Unable to contain his excitement, Mr. Frazier exclaims, "that was a 10.1! Good job! Good Job!" Eddie replies to Mr. Frazier, "awesome! Some guy just told me my time!" Eddie, however, doesn't want to get too excited. He still has to run in the 4 by 440 relay, which is the last event of today's meet. Eddie talks with a few of his friends, as the focus now shifts to the 4 by 220 relay.

Off in a distance, in the middle of the Kill the Man with the Ball field, is the square-jawed guy who lost to Eddie and Mark in the 100-yard dash. Eddie quickly points out to Mark, "hey! Check out the square-jawed guy! He's having a serious meltdown!" Mark looks out at the field, telling Eddie, "wow! He's a serious mess." Mark then informs Eddie, "I found out what his name is. His name is Todd McCutchen." Eddie asks, "what? His name is McCutchen? Are you serious?" Mark laughs, replying, "his real name is Todd McCutchen, but I'm calling him McCutchen from now on."

The square-jawed guy now has a name, Todd McCutchen. Mark and Eddie have a tendency to make up a name or mispronounce the name of anyone they don't like. To Mark and Eddie, Todd McCutchen will now be known as McCutchen instead of Rock 'em Sock 'em, square-jaw, or his real name, Todd McCutchen. It's a sure bet Mark will get a lot of amusement messing with McCutchen in the future.

Out on the football field, McCutchen, still kicking rocks, making a fist, and throwing his hands in the air, is obviously not a happy camper. Eddie is amused, watching McCutchen expend energy on a childish meltdown. McCutchen, if he were smart, should be conserving his energy for the upcoming 4 by 440 relay. Mark and McCutchen will be the anchormen in the relay. Eddie will be passing the baton to Mark, hopefully long before McCutchen receives his.

Mark and Eddie move with the crowd from event to event. They catch up with Braden, who just won the 440-yard run. Eddie asks Braden, "how did you do in the 440, bro?" Braden replies, "I ran it in 65 seconds! But, I could have done better. I was saving my energy for the final ass kicking of the day!" Eddie replies, "that's okay, bro. You won. That's all that matters." Braden, who conserved as much energy as he could, will have to run 440 yards again in just a few moments. Braden will be first off in the 4 by 440 relay, followed by Eric Johnson, who won the 220-yard dash earlier today, then Eddie and Mark.

Eddie wanders over to the field event area, and catches up with Bobby B. again. The track events and field events occur simultaneously, so the track athletes and the field athletes rarely get a chance to mingle with each other during a meet. Eddie and the shot doc fill each other in on how the events are going. Both deliver good news to each other. Since Bobby B. and Gary Mitchell are good friends, Eddie mentions to Bobby B. that Mitchell beat the walking toothpick in the mile.

The shot doc proudly tells Eddie, "I won." Eddie asks, "what? The high jump?" Bobby B. laughs, and replies, "no. The shot-put. I won by sixteen feet!" Eddie jokingly tells Bobby B., "that's right. You throw the shot-put. How could I forget?" Still messing with Bobby B., Eddie asks, "that's it? You won by only sixteen feet?" Bobby B. replies, "I'm having a bad day. I only broke my old record by two feet." They both have a good laugh, and Eddie tells the shot doc to come watch the 4 by 440 relay. The shot doc's job is frequently done quickly, so he usually hangs around the field events encouraging the rest of the field athletes. But, because of all the excitement today, the 4 by 440 relay is one race the shot doc does not want to miss.

Eddie and Bobby B. meander back to the starting line for the relay race. The shot doc mixes with the crowd as Eddie meets up with Mark, Braden and Johnson. The 4 by 440 relay team casually looks around to see if they can find who they are up against, knowing for sure that McCutchen is Centerville's anchorman. They spot McCutchen, who finally got over his meltdown, standing with two others. One of the guys alongside McCutchen just lost to Braden. Not much is known about the other guy who is standing along with them. With the race just a few minutes away, there is still no sign of Centerville's fourth runner. But, Eddie and his teammates don't care. Their confidence level is far better now than at the start of the meet. McCutchen, and his team, seem to be more concerned with Mark and Eddie's team, pointing in their direction several times. Jogging over from the field events area is Centerville's high-jumper, who will fill the remaining position in the relay event.

The announcement comes from one of the officials to prepare for the final event. Braden moves into position, next to the guy he beat out in

the quarter mile earlier today. The guy is probably not too happy to see Braden again. Braden, running in place, is yelling, "I'm hot! I'm hot today! I'm kicking your flimsy ass again! Once just wasn't enough! We're all kicking ass today!" Braden has an uncanny ability to suck the optimism and confidence out of his opponent, albeit quite unintentionally.

A few yards behind Braden, the other legs of the relay race are standing to the inside of the track near the handoff zone. As a formality, a Timekeeper points out the handoff zone to the teams and describes the penalty for handing off outside the zone. Handing off the baton outside of the transition zone results in an immediate disqualification. A disqualification means you lose the race by default, which is not something that any of the athletes would want to be responsible for.

The Timekeeper again motions for the teams to get ready, and instructs the teams, "run a fair race." No one really knows why officials occasionally say "run a fair race". It's not likely that a runner is going to pull out a can of pepper spray or mace and spray the other runner on the other side of the track while no one is watching.

"On your marks," announces the Starter in a robotic monotone voice. The runners get ready. "Set," he proclaims two or three seconds later, but the anxious runners were already in the process of getting set. Waiting for at least two seconds of stillness, the Starter fires his gun, and the runners take off.

Braden leaves the starting line with enough speed to convince anyone that he is running a 40-yard dash. His opponent again struggles to keep up, remembering that, just twenty minutes ago, Braden kicked his butt in the quarter mile. A quarter way around the 440-yard track, Braden begins to slow his pace slightly. Judging the distance of the runner behind him by the sound of the runner's feet, Braden stays a comfortable ten to fifteen yards ahead. Braden keeps this pace for the next 200 yards or so, and then begins to make his move. Sprinting the last 100 yards, the gap begins to widen. His opponent closes the widening gap to some degree, but has lost any opportunity to win this leg. Watching Braden approaching the transition zone, Johnson takes off cautiously. Johnson times the transition well, and the handoff goes perfectly.

At the beginning of Johnson's leg, his opponent is 30 yards behind. Johnson's opponent, the high jumper, is gaining ground and was apparently underestimated. Passing Johnson about halfway around the track, the high jumper shows no sign of fatigue or slowing down. Mark, who looks over at Eddie, exclaims, "shit!" Eddie yells out, "where in the world did they get that guy from?" Just then, McCutchen proudly yells back to Eddie, "our guy is kicking your guy's ass!" Braden yells back to McCutchen, "ain't no one kicking our ass!"

Eddie takes to the track. There is now real work to do. Mark and Eddie will not be happy with second place, especially since there are only two teams in the race. The high jumper comes in ten yards ahead of Johnson, and hands off the baton first. Impatiently waiting for Johnson, Eddie feels as if 30 seconds have elapsed since the opponent passed his baton. In reality, however, less than two seconds have elapsed. Receiving the baton from Johnson, Eddie takes off like a wild man.

Eddie begins to gain ground on his opponent during his leg. It is difficult to see whether Eddie is speeding up or the opponent is dropping his pace. At the halfway mark, Eddie passes the opponent, who is struggling to speed up in order to catch Eddie. Eddie, however, will not allow himself to be caught. Eddie remembers that, according to Mr. Frazier, second place gets the grand title of being the first loser. Knowing that Mr. Frazier is watching, Eddie does not want the infamous title of being the first loser.

Getting a closer look at the Centerville runner who was up against Johnson, Mr. Frazier asks his student assistant, "does that guy look familiar to you?" The student assistant replies, "yeah. He does. But I can't put my finger on where I know him from." Unknown to Mr. Frazier, his student assistant, Mr. Harris, and his 4 by 440 relay team, Centerville's high jumper and second leg in the 4 by 440 relay is Scott McCutchen, Todd McCutchen's older brother. Scott, who is in the eleventh grade and runs for Centerville High School, should not have even been on the track.

Meanwhile, back at the starting line, Mark and McCutchen take to the track. Because Eddie is ahead, the Timekeeper assigns Mark the inside position. McCutchen remembers well Mark's comment just before the gun went off in the 100-yard dash. In an attempt to even the score, McCutchen says to Mark, "your laces aren't tied right." Looking at Mark with obviously fake deep concern, McCutchen adds, "one loop is too long, and you're going to trip." Without even looking down, Mark authoritatively declares to McCutchen, "shut up, junior. Go back to sleep. I have a race to win." That encounter certainly backfired on McCutchen. Mark two, McCutchen zero.

For the last 100 yards of his leg, Eddie sprints as fast as he can, knowing that Mark will be up against McCutchen. Eddie's opponent was left in the dust, and burned out three-quarters of the way around the track. This is the nature of a relay race. The team in the lead often changes throughout the race. Eddie enters the transition zone, and passes the baton flawlessly to Mark. McCutchen, if he is going to win, now has more than 30 yards to make up. He has made up this yardage in the past, which is why he is their anchorman. McCutchen grabs his baton, and chases down Mark.

Mark maintains his 30-yard lead for the first 100 or so yards. McCutchen, giving it all he has, is unable to catch Mark. Perhaps McCutchen spent too much energy on his temper tantrum earlier after he lost the 100-yard dash. Mark, now with about 200 yards to go, knows he has the race wrapped up. Instead of slowing his pace and taking it a little easy, Mark speeds up. The gap begins to widen between the two runners. With 100 yards to go, Mark now has almost a 60-yard lead, which equates to about six seconds at this pace. As Mark gets closer, he can hear the rest of the team members cheering him on. The cheering gives Mark more motivation to keep up his pace even though he's already won the race. Mark cruises across the finish line, leaving McCutchen far behind, almost in a different zip code.

Mr. Frazier, the high school coach, again unable to contain his excitement, exclaims, "that was a 56 quarter! A 56! Can anyone believe it?" Mr. Harris, who is usually a little reserved, also shows his excitement, telling the team, "that was your best run of the year! Good job, guys! Good job!" And it was their last run of the year. That phenomenal finish was the close of this year's track season.

With the team winning the meet, Mr. Harris is quite exhilarated, partially because he has a team that impressed Mr. Frazier. The flip side of it is that Mark, Eddie, Axel Braden, Eric Johnson, Gary Mitchell, Robert Bradshaw, and a few others, will move on to high school next year. Mr. Harris will have to develop new talent for next year's track season. As the team heads to the locker room, they share notes on each event, and congratulate each other on a season that could not have ended better.

With the school year coming to a close, it's a sure bet that Eddie and Mark will be training hard this Summer. After all, next year is high school, and they both will be competing for a place on the varsity track team, where the competition is real. In high school, there is indoor track during the Winter, and the usual Spring track season. Eddie and Mark will both have to step up their game. They both look forward to being part of the Northside High School Eagles and having Mr. Frazier as their coach.