

Eddie, The Freshman Year

Chapter Four Indoor Track Tryouts

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Now that Christmas break is over, it's back to school for everyone. As usual, no real work gets done in the classroom the first day back from break. The talk in Eddie's circle is all about indoor track tryouts, which begin this afternoon after school. Last year, in middle school, Eddie, Mark, Axel Braden, Bobby B., Eric Johnson, and Gary Mitchell did not really have to try out for the team. They only showed up for tryouts to set the standard that no one else can meet. This year, however, it will be a little different.

As the school day comes to a close, the day is just beginning for a certain group of students. Tryouts begin for all the Winter sports. Gump, who secured a position on the football team earlier this year, will hopefully be on the wrestling mat over the Winter. Indoor track brings a different set of events than does Spring track. Marginal track and field athletes will not likely make the Winter indoor track team. With fewer events, the competition is a lot tougher. Bobby B. is happy that the shot-put event is held in Winter track, which is not part of the Winter season events in some regions. During the indoor track season, for Mark and Eddie, there is no 100-yard dash for which to try out. Instead, the sprints are less than 60 yards. In Eddie's school district, the short sprint during the indoor track season is the 40-yard dash.

As many of the students head for their busses, this year's Winter athletic hopefuls all head for the locker room. Wrestlers, basketball players, and track athletes all pour into the locker room. Eddie, and his crew, meet in the hall after class, and walk in together. As the athletes are getting dressed for the tryouts, Mr. Zunde announces, "basketball tryouts are in the main gym. Wrestling tryouts are in the auxiliary gym. If you are trying out for track, please meet in the hallway outside the locker room." Mark asks Braden, "why are we meeting in the hallway? Where are

we going to run?” Braden replies, “I guess we’ll find out.” Johnson surmises, “maybe, we’ll be practicing on the outdoor track.”

The track team candidates meet outside the locker room, waiting for Mr. Frazier to arrive. Eddie, and his tribe, are off to the side. They are joined by a few members of the middle school track team from last year. The upperclassmen form several smaller groups. Looking around, it is no secret who the seniors are. The students look each over carefully, somehow thinking that there is a way to assess someone’s speed by observing their stationary body.

Paul Mahoney, who is conversing with Anthony Ambrosini, is looking in the direction of Eddie. Ambrosini comments to Mahoney, “there are a lot more of them. Where are they all coming from?” Mahoney replies, “it looks like the guy in the red and the two guys next to him are juicing¹ it,” referring to Eddie, Mark, and Braden. After checking out the competition a little further, Mahoney mentions, “they look a little big for freshmen.” Mahoney is correct. Eddie and his friends are somewhat well developed for freshmen. Their size is the result of genetics and having worked out for many years.

Mr. Frazier walks out from the athletic office, and announces, “this is the meeting place for indoor track. If you are trying out for another sport, you are in the wrong place. If you are trying out for track, please follow me.” Any student in the wrong place is out of luck getting any assistance from Mr. Frazier today. Mr. Frazier walks down the hallway, pulling out his keys to open a door with no number, sign, or markings. The upperclassmen know exactly what is behind this door, but the freshmen, who have no clue, are about to find out.

Mr. Frazier unlocks the door, and the upperclassmen enter first. Behind the door is a very wide steel stairway, which goes to the basement of the school. Few students know that there is even a basement to the school, and even fewer have been there. The side of the stairway has an open railing, allowing a panoramic view of what is downstairs. Eddie, along with the other freshmen walking down the steel staircase, looks in awe at what they see in the basement. Underneath the classrooms is a full-sized 220-yard indoor track with a composite rubber surface. Off to the side, disconnected from the oval, is a long track for the sprinting events. In the center of the track is where the high jump and shot-put events are held. To either side of the track are bleachers for the spectators. At the corners of the arena are benches to hold up to four competing teams, each complete with an adjoining locker room.

¹ Juicing: A slang term for using anabolic steroids.

Eddie looks at Mark, and remarks, "wow! This is the big time!" Braden, looking at the setup, is at a loss for words, if one can imagine that. As Mr. Frazier instructs everyone to have a seat on the bleachers, Mr. Zunde walks down the staircase. Mr. Frazier begins, "I want my sprinters over here on this side, with me." Pointing across the room, Mr. Frazier continues, "I want the distance men and the field athletes across the track on the other set of bleachers. If you are middle distance, I want you with the distance men today." Delivering some interesting news to the freshmen, Mr. Frazier announces, "and, if you run the 440, you are now a sprinter! In high school, the 440 is the 440-yard dash. It is no longer a leisurely jog around the track." Mr. Frazier then instructs the students to move to the correct side of the track.

Mr. Zunde helps Mr. Frazier out with the training, primarily working with the shot-put athletes. The school's athletic director, Mr. Zunde, is also the school's strength training coach. He works extensively with the football team in the weight room during the Autumn, and with the shot-put athletes during the Winter track season. Today, and during the next few days of tryouts, Mr. Zunde will also be working with the distance runners. Once the team has been finalized, Mr. Zunde will then be working exclusively with the shot-put athletes in the weight room.

Gary Mitchell, having a respectable cross country season, walks across the track with the distance men. Mark, Eddie, Braden, and Johnson all sit together, along with a few dozen students who hope to be sprinters. Braden is not his hyper energetic self today, somewhat due to the uncertainty of the higher level of competition.

Addressing the sprinters, Mr. Frazier explains the events for which they will be trying out. Mr. Frazier explains that he will be deciding who runs in which event, based upon their performance. Mr. Frazier tells the sprinters, "I want you to stretch, take a warm-up lap, two, three, whatever you need." He then announces, "the first event will be the 40-yard dash, and everyone will be running it for time." The students jog around the track, stretch, run in place, doing whatever they need to get warmed up.

Once the sprinters are warmed up, Mr. Frazier instructs everyone to stand behind the starting line. He announces, "you will be running two at a time." This is because Mr. Frazier has only two hands and therefore can only work two stopwatches at once. Having a foot-operated buzzer at the other end of the track, Mr. Frazier is a one man Timekeeper. He tells the students, "pair up, preferably with someone of your own skill level." Mark pairs up with Eddie, and Braden pairs up with Johnson.

Up first is the ROTC poster boy himself, Paul Mahoney. Mahoney is paired up with Darryl Bell, who is a junior this year. Bell, although not as fast as Mahoney, was one of the top sprinters last year. Mahoney and Bell

step up to the starting blocks, adjusting them to their liking. Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks,” as he waits for the runners to get ready. He then announces, “set.” Once the runners are in the “set” position, Mr. Frazier waits two seconds and hits the starting buzzer. The runners leave the blocks with lightning speed. Mark and Eddie all of a sudden get serious. This looks like real competition. Halfway down the track, Mahoney has a step or two lead over Bell. About six seconds later, they both cross the finish line, Mahoney first, and Bell a few steps behind him. Setting the initial standard for today, Mr. Frazier announces, “Mahoney, 5.5 seconds. Bell, 5.7 seconds.”

After hearing Mahoney’s and Bell’s times, Mark asks Eddie, “is that good?” Eddie thinks about it for a moment, as the second group of runners take off. Eddie, unsure of his math, replies, “I don’t think so. That seems like it would be a 14-second 100-yard dash. I thought a good time in the 40-yard dash was like in the upper four-second, not upper five-second, range.” Mark replies, “I think you’re right about that.” Eddie comments, “last year, in middle school, I ran the 50-yard dash in 5.8 seconds in gym class one day. That guy just ran 40 yards in 5.7 seconds. That can’t be too good.”

The upperclassmen, who were all at the head of the line, complete their heats. Now the freshmen are up, which catches Eddie and Mark’s attention. As Eddie and Mark continue chatting, Johnson and Braden get behind the starting blocks. Johnson and Braden have not been paying too much attention to the previous runners, but rather stretching to prepare for their own run.

Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks.” The runners all get ready. He then announces, “set,” and the runners get set in the blocks. Mr. Frazier hits the starting buzzer. Johnson and Braden are off, with Johnson taking a slight lead at the halfway mark. Crossing the finish line in what seems to be no time, Johnson edges out Braden by a split second. Mr. Frazier makes the announcement, “Johnson, 5.3 seconds. Braden, 5.4 seconds.” Eddie tells Mark, “5.5 was the time to beat, and Johnson ran a 5.3.” It does not take Mark and Eddie too much time to realize that they will also beat Mahoney’s time. Johnson, although he is awesome at the 220, 440, and 880-yard events, presents no competition for Mark or Eddie in a short sprint.

Another two runners get set in the blocks as Mark and Eddie get psyched up, for they are up next. After the heat, the announcement comes from Mr. Frazier, “James, 6.0 seconds. Clinton, 6.3 seconds.” Mr. Frazier, unimpressed with those times, exclaims, “do I need to get a calendar out to measure these times?” That was all Mark and Eddie needed to hear to get their adrenaline going and raise their energy level. Mark whispers to Eddie, “his timing is really consistent,” referring to the

time that elapses between Mr. Frazier announcing “set” and the buzzer going off. What that means to Eddie and Mark is they can anticipate the buzzer.

Mark and Eddie walk up to the blocks, with their adrenaline levels now through the roof. This is their moment, what they have been training for. At the end of the track, standing along with Mr. Frazier, are a few of the other sprinters. One of them is Paul Mahoney. Mahoney has heard a lot about Mark and Eddie, but has never seen them in formal track competition. Standing with Mahoney is Darryl Bell, who both have reasonably good times thus far today. They are both standing with their arms crossed, waiting to see what the two freshmen can deliver.

Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks,” and waits for the runners to get ready. He then announces, “set.” Once the runners are set, he hits the starting buzzer after the predicted two seconds. Mark and Eddie, who both anticipated the buzzer well, are off. Out of the blocks, they are head to head. Looking down the track in amazement is Mahoney, who cannot believe what he is seeing. At the halfway mark, there is no clear leader. When Mark is up against Eddie, neither want to lose. For a split second, it looks like Mark might have been ahead but, closer to the finish line, Eddie may have a quarter step advantage. Crossing the finish line first is Eddie, who edges out Mark by about a quarter step. Mark and Eddie are both immediately wondering if they ran a qualifying time to make the team.

Mr. Frazier, looking at his stopwatches, is checking one watch against the other. It seems as if eternity passes before the times are announced, especially to Mark and Eddie. Also waiting to hear the times is Mahoney, who does not have a good feeling right now. Mr. Frazier announces the long awaited result, “we have a tie! Eddie, 4.8 seconds, and Mark, 4.8 seconds! That was an awesome run!” He looks at his stopwatches again, just to make sure the time is really 4.8 seconds, and not 5.8 seconds. Seeing that both stopwatches agree, the times are confirmed to be 4.8 seconds.

Eddie’s and Mark’s times of 4.8 seconds is in the upper one percentile for their age group. Giving each other high-fives, they are both ecstatic that they have the best time of the day. Most track athletes run better in competition, rather than during time trials. Mahoney and Bell, even though they did not have the best time of the day, are not to be underestimated. Neither are Mark and Eddie to be underestimated. Being freshmen, Mark and Eddie are delivering the same blow to Mahoney as they delivered to Ambrosini and the sophomores in gym class.

Meanwhile, in the center of the track, the high jump and shot-put tryouts are in full swing. The field events in Winter track are somewhat limited, mostly because it is difficult to throw a discus, hammer, or javelin

indoors. The field athletes generally keep track of their own performance. Bobby B., having a good day, has the second best performance of the afternoon. A senior, Matt Wood, beat out Bobby B. by several feet. Bobby fits in well with the others in this event, who all let him retain his title as the doctor of the shot-put even though he is a freshman. After today, there is no doubt that Bobby B. will make the team.

The next race to be run is the 220-yard dash, which is one lap around the oval track. To give the sprinters the same amount of rest, Mr. Frazier instructs the contenders to run the 220-yard dash in the same order in which they ran in the 40-yard dash. The distance group, who just completed the one-mile run, is now taking a short rest. The distance group will also be participating in the 220-yard dash along with the sprinters. Mark, Eddie, Braden, and Johnson catch up with Mitchell, who just ran a 5:23 in the mile, beating out Jeff Davis, the sophomore miler from Eddie's gym class.

Mitchell, who is upset with his time, is counseled by one of the upperclassmen, Louis Zaino, who is also a cross country team member. Zaino explains to Mitchell that his times are going to be slower on a 220-yard track. This is because, on a 220-yard track, the curves are sharper and are not banked. Zaino also explains to Mitchell that the pace of the race is determined by the front runner. If the pace is fast, everyone runs faster. If the pace is slow, everyone seems to run slower. This makes sense to Mitchell, who had a decent run for the day.

Mr. Frazier tells the sprinters to get ready for the 220-yard dash. Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde will be both keeping time, so four runners will be in each heat. The starting blocks are placed into position as the first group gets ready. Mr. Frazier announces that, within each group, the runner with the best time in the 40-yard dash gets the inside lane, and the runner with the worst time gets the outside lane. Paul Mahoney is in the first group, with Bell, who are in the inside and second lanes respectively. The slower runners get the outside lanes.

There is a long-standing argument whether the inside lanes or the outside lanes on an unbanked 220-yard track are the most desirable. The inside lanes have a bit of a sharper curve to them, potentially slowing the runner to a slight degree. The outside lanes have only a moderate curve, which may prove to be a slight advantage. If the curves are banked, there is no expected performance difference between the inside and outside lanes. On a 440-yard track, the difference in the sharpness of the curve in each lane is negligible. Interesting to note is that a runner with a greater mass will have an advantage running in the outside lanes. Also, with a staggered start, the runners on the inside lanes start the race in a position physically behind the runners in the outside lanes. This gives the runners in the inside lanes a much better visual of what is transpiring

during the race. Nevertheless, runners seem to always prefer the inside lanes.

Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks,” as he waits for the runners to get ready. He then announces, “set.” Once the runners are set, he hits the starting buzzer, and the runners are off. With the staggered start, it is difficult to see who is ahead. Johnson is watching carefully because the 220-yard dash is his race. Halfway around the track, Mahoney is clearly ahead. His lead appears to be increasing, but it is still difficult to judge because the runners remain staggered until the final straightaway. As the runners come out of the final curve, it becomes obvious that Mahoney is going to win, and Bell will be in second place. Mahoney crosses the finish line with a time of 33.3 seconds, followed by Bell with a time of 34.2 seconds. The other two runners, with times in the upper 30-second range, will probably not make the team.

Johnson’s heat comes up. Johnson is paired up with Braden, Jeff Davis, and Jimmy O’Brien, whose father is a social studies teacher in the high school. O’Brien possesses little or no athletic ability, and made the track team in middle school only because his father is a teacher. This, however, is high school. O’Brien will have to rely on his own skill if he is to make the team. Johnson, who has never run a staggered start race, is aware he will appear like he is winning because of the staggering. He does not want to be blind sided and lose a place on the team, especially since this is his best event.

Mr. Frazier again announces, “on your marks,” as he waits for the runners to get ready. Announcing, “set,” Mr. Frazier has his eyes on Johnson. Once the runners are set, he hits the starting buzzer. Johnson is out of the blocks as fast as he was for the 40-yard dash. Halfway around the track, Johnson is clearly ahead, but he is not aware of this. He senses the runners are catching up, and gets the false impression he is falling behind. This is the nature of a staggered track. Until the runners get closer to the finish line, the runners in the outer lanes appear to be in the lead. Johnson, vying for his place on the team, pours on all the speed he has. Braden, thinking he is behind by a large margin, is trying to catch Johnson. Into the straightaway, Johnson is in the lead, with Braden following closely behind. Johnson crosses the finish line first, with Braden crossing a second or so after. Jeff Davis, who ran a mile earlier, is still coming out of the turn when Braden crosses the finish line. O’Brien, turning in a dismal performance, is just entering the final curve when Jeff Davis crosses the finish line.

Mr. Frazier confers with Mr. Zunde to compile the runner’s times. After recording the times on paper, Mr. Frazier announces, “Johnson, 31.5 seconds. Braden, 32.8 seconds. Davis, 42.3 seconds. And O’Brien, you ran a 58.4, which would have been a good time if you were running the

440-yard dash!" Mark has a good laugh after hearing O'Brien's time because Mark can run 440 yards faster than O'Brien can run 220 yards. It will be interesting to see if O'Brien makes the team this year.

After a few more heats, it's Eddie and Mark's turn. They are teamed up with two runners who are the upperclassmen that ran before Eddie and Mark in the 40-yard dash. Eddie gets the inside lane, and Mark is in lane number two. It is embarrassing for the upperclassmen to be in the outer lanes, but that is where their prior performance landed them. Most of the athletes are standing in the center of the track or sitting on the bleachers, relaxing as they watch the last race of the day. Mahoney, standing next to Mr. Frazier at the finish line, no longer needs an explanation as to why Ambrosini refers to this group of freshmen as *Eddie's Tribe*.

Mr. Frazier, wondering how Mark and Eddie will fare in the 220-yard dash, announces, "on your marks." He announces, "set," watching the group carefully. As he hits the starting buzzer, Mr. Frazier tries to see which of the runners are the fastest out of the blocks. Mark and Eddie leave the blocks, racing against the clock, each other, and Mahoney's time. Around the first curve, Eddie and Mark have to contend with a curve in the track, which slows their times a bit. On the back straightaway, Eddie and Mark sprint as fast as they can before entering the second curve. Coming out of the curve, Eddie has a slight lead over Mark. Mark tries to catch up, but there is not enough distance left in the race to catch Eddie. Eddie crosses the finish line first, with Mark following closely behind. After Mark finishes, the remaining two runners break out of the final turn. Twelve seconds after Mark, the final runner crosses the finish line.

Mr. Frazier, speaking longer than usual with Mr. Zunde, writes the runner's times on paper. Then, comes the announcement. Breaking the news, Mr. Frazier announces, "Bogenskaya, 28.3 seconds. Svoboda, 29.1 seconds. Smith, 39.7 seconds. And, McDaniel, 41.3 seconds." Mr. Frazier is exhilarated that Eddie, Mark, and the rest of the freshmen are delivering the level of performance he saw last Spring during the final track meet of the year at the middle school.

Closing out the afternoon, Mr. Frazier reminds everyone, "although we are competing against each other today, we are a team, and soon we will be competing against the real opponents." This does not raise Mahoney's spirits. Just like Ambrosini was taken down on the football field, Paul Mahoney is now being taken down on the track. The good news is that all indications are that Mark, Eddie, and the rest of the tribe, have a place on the team.

Mr. Frazier instructs the candidates to all return tomorrow, at the same time and place. Tomorrow's events will be the 440-yard dash, the

880-yard run, and the relay events. Mr. Frazier informs the athletes that, after tomorrow's tryouts, the first cut will be made. He tells the students that the list of successful candidates will be posted on the window of the administration office the day after tomorrow by the time they arrive at school.

In the locker room, the discussion turns to the previous two hours. Mahoney is heard saying, "it's only tryouts. No one is running their best." Another senior informs Mahoney, "some of the new guys are looking quite good." Mahoney answers, "yeah. But, they haven't run against me yet."

Meanwhile, Mark, at the other end of the locker room, overhears Mahoney's conversation and tells Eddie and Braden, "they're talking about us." Braden, back to his hyper energetic self, replies, "yeah, well let 'em talk! We kicked their ass and we're gonna do it again!" Eddie reminds Braden, "remember, we're all going to be on the same team." Braden responds, "yeah! I know! But, until then, every single one of them is my opponent!" Braden has a valid point. Today's goal is to make the team. Tomorrow's goal is to beat the real competition.

The second day of tryouts arrives, and the talk around school is how Mahoney was beaten at his own race. Mahoney brushes off the comments, repeating, "it's just tryouts." Mahoney, however, is worried. The confidence of Mark, Eddie, Axel Braden, Gary Mitchell, and Eric Johnson reach an all-time high. As freshmen, they find themselves able to compete at the high school level quite competently.

At the end of the school day, the day is just beginning for the indoor track candidates. The students head to the locker room again for the second day of tryouts. Inside the locker room, there is an eerie silence today when compared with yesterday. Today is the second session of tryouts for the big three - basketball, wrestling, and track. The coaches have a good idea of who will make their respective teams, but the students do not. Not making the team could be a devastating blow to some, yet, to others, it will be no big deal.

The track team candidates exit the locker room one by one and move into the hallway. Today, there is a lot less chatter than yesterday. Mahoney, who usually commands a lot of attention, gets none. Mark and Braden mess around, and get into a boxing match, just for fun. This sends the signal that they are not stressed in the least. It also creates the center of attention. Braden does not try to be the center of attention, but his energetic personality seems to focus it in his direction all too often. Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde walk down the hallway from the administrative office, and signal the team to follow them downstairs to the track.

Once in the arena, Mr. Frazier instructs everyone to sit on the bleachers. He addresses the team candidates, saying, “many of you gave an awesome performance yesterday, but some of you were not giving it your best. Today, I expect a lot better. As you know, today, we will be running the 440-yard dash followed by the 880-yard run. Afterwards, we will be doing relay drills. During the drill, I will be looking at how well you handoff and receive the baton. We will not be running relay races for time.”

Recalling last semesters’ gym class, Mr. Frazier makes the announcement, “Mahoney, Eddie, Mark, Braden, Johnson, Bell, Ambrosini, and O’Brien, all of you come and see me.” He instructs the rest of the runners, “the rest of you form groups of four.” The eight runners approach Mr. Frazier, wondering what’s up. Mr. Frazier informs Mahoney, Eddie, Mark, and Braden that they will all be running in the same heat, and that they will be going first. Mr. Frazier informs Johnson, Bell, Ambrosini, and O’Brien that they will be running in the second heat together. Mr. Frazier threw O’Brien into Johnson’s heat to show O’Brien what real competition is. He prearranges a couple of other groups in order to compare certain runners. Mr. Frazier then tells all the runners to get ready, instructing them, “stretch, take a few warm-up laps, and do whatever you need to warm up. Your place on the team may depend on it.”

After blowing his whistle, Mr. Frazier tells the runners to stand along with their group to the side of the track, near the starting line. He calls for the first group, assigning Braden to lane one. This is the inside lane, and is usually reserved for the fastest runner. Mahoney thinks this should be his lane but, Mr. Frazier, by assigning this lane to Braden, implies Mahoney should try harder. Eddie is assigned to lane number two. Mark is assigned to lane number three. Mahoney, as a surprise to all, is assigned to lane number four, and is not the least bit happy.

Mr. Frazier then instructs the runners, “440 yards is one quarter mile, which is two laps around this track.” He continues, for those who do not know, “after the first lap, you do not have to stay in your lane.” There are markings on the track denoting a staggered start for both 220 and 440 yards. Mr. Frazier could have staggered the start in such a way that the runners would stay in their lane during the entire 440 yards, which is often done in indoor track, but today he chose not to. Mr. Frazier already knows that Eddie, Mark, and Braden can run a 54-second quarter mile. He is more interested in how the runners interact with each other and jockey for position on the track. This will also make the race more interesting.

The runners stand behind the starting blocks, and Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks.” Waiting for the runners to get ready, he then announces, “set.” The runners get set, and are ready to go. The

buzzer goes off, and the runners leave the blocks as if they are running for an Olympic gold medal. Mahoney, leaving the blocks, raises his legs high during his stride to show off, which does not afford him any extra speed. Mark and Eddie, in their usual competitive spirit, leave the blocks with enough speed to convince anyone they are running the 40-yard dash. Braden, in lane one, is not fooling around. The 440-yard dash is his race, and he refuses to let anyone show him up. This race is the reason Braden is here.

Halfway around the first lap, not even Mr. Frazier can discern the leader. Coming around the curve into the straightaway, it becomes apparent that Braden is in front. Eddie and Mark are head to head, with Mahoney in last place. The runners drop in behind Braden, with Eddie closely following, and Mark right behind Eddie. Far behind Mark is Mahoney. If Mahoney is going to win this race, he will have to do it in the back straightaway. Mahoney gives it all he has sprinting along the back straightaway, but surprisingly finds himself losing ground. Eddie keeps pace closely with Braden, which is a smart move on his part. If Mark is to pass Eddie and drop in, he must pass Braden too. At the end of the back straightaway, no one is able to change their position. As the runners clear the final curve, Braden, Eddie, and Mark fight it out. Eddie tries to pass Braden, but is unable. Mark, who is in third place, tries his best to catch Eddie. And Mahoney, who is now far behind, has burned out early and lost a lot of ground. Braden crosses the finish line first, quickly followed by Eddie, and then Mark. Mahoney, even though he ran a respectable time, arrives at the finish line last.

Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde speak with each other and record the runner's times. Mr. Frazier gives some encouragement to the group, announcing, "this is the kind of running I like to see! I want to see everyone give this kind of effort!" Then, the announcement comes, "Braden, 54.2 seconds. Bogenskaya, 55.0 seconds. Svoboda, 55.7 seconds. And Mahoney, 59.8 seconds." Mr. Frazier reminds everyone that this race was a time trial, and he expects the athletes will perform better in competition.

As the next group gets ready, Mark and Braden move off to the side, and Eddie walks over to talk with Bobby B. for a moment. Johnson will be in this next heat, so they will be watching closely. As Eddie is talking with Bobby B., he overhears Mahoney talking with Matt Wood, the senior shot-putter. Wandering a little closer to hear what is being said, Eddie hears Mahoney telling Wood that he hates the 880-yard run. The 880-yard run is the next event, and will take place after everyone completes the 440-yard dash.

The buzzer goes off and Johnson's heat begins. While Johnson is running, Eddie gets an idea. Eddie tells Mark and Braden what he

overheard between Mahoney and Matt Wood. Eddie, Mark, and Braden also don't like competing in the 880-yard run. It is not a sprint, and it is not a distance race. Braden sees the 880-yard run as a race with which you get stuck. Eddie tells Mark and Braden, "look, we hate the 880, and so does Mahoney. We did really good in the sprints. We beat Mahoney and everyone else." Revealing his idea, Eddie whispers to his friends, "if we let Mahoney win the 880, we won't have to run it, and he'll probably get stuck with it." Braden likes the idea, since running both a 440-yard dash and an 880-yard run in one meet is not exactly his idea of fun. Mark, who detests the 880-yard run, has no problem letting Mahoney win it. If Mark had to run 880 yards in competition, he'd probably quit the team.

Too busy talking about their plan, they missed the finish of Johnson's race. They walk over to Johnson, and Braden asks, "how did it go?" Johnson, still somewhat winded, replies, "sub-60, like 58 something. I won." Mark asks Johnson, "hey, do you like the 880?" Johnson replies, "no way!" Mark lets Johnson in on their plan, giving him all the details. Johnson points out, "if Mahoney wins, he may not act like such a jerk anymore." Eddie, Mark, and Braden are all in on the plan. Also in on the plan, Johnson tells the group, "that sounds like a good plan to me. I'll take it easy on my heat too."

Most of the 440-yard dash heats go well, but no one came close to the times of the first group and Johnson. Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson are at the top of their game. The worst quarter mile time of the day was delivered by Jimmy O'Brien, who ran a time that would rival the best half-mile times. Some people wonder why O'Brien, who is still expecting to make the team, is even at the tryouts.

Mark suspects the same groups that ran the 440-yard dash will have to run the 880-yard run together, and he is right. Mr. Frazier makes the announcement to prepare for the 880-yard run, telling the groups they will run in the same order. Braden, all fired up after yesterday's tryouts, exclaims, "I'm hot, I'm hot! Ain't no one stopping me! No one!" Braden said this, however, not to get his own adrenaline levels up. He fully intended for his ranting to get Mahoney's adrenaline levels up so that Mahoney runs a better race.

Mr. Frazier instructs the runners, "880 yards is one half mile, which is four laps around the track. After the first lap, you do not have to stay in your lane." Eddie asks, "are we in the same lanes?" Mr. Frazier responds, "no. To be fair, we will reverse the lane assignments. If you were in lane one, you will be in lane four. If you were in lane two, you will be in lane three, etcetera." This sounds simple enough, but someone is bound to screw it up along the way. The runners take to their lanes. There are no starting blocks for the 880-yard run, a somewhat foreign way to start a

race to the sprinters. Standing proud in lane one is Mahoney, who is not about to lose another race. Mahoney is totally unaware that he has a few runners who are going to help him win.

Mr. Zunde, wasting no time, tells the runners, “get set,” and, less than one second later, hits the buzzer. Mahoney is the first one off the starting line, and takes the lead. Mark and Eddie, who expected a delay after Mr. Zunde said “get set” suffer a delayed start by a second or so. Braden, in the outside lane, starts out strong, pushing Mahoney. Not about to lose another race, Mahoney is not allowing Braden to catch him. For the first lap the runners keep pace with each other. At the end of the lap, the runners leave their lanes and drop to the inside lane of the track. Mahoney is in first place. Braden drops in behind Mahoney into second place. Eddie is in third place, and Mark is happily in last place. Braden makes Mahoney work hard, following him closely. Eddie and Mark are several steps behind Braden. By the end of the second lap, Mahoney is still in the lead, with Braden right behind. Eddie and Mark maintain a good distance behind the leaders.

Just into the third lap, Braden perceives Mahoney is making a move, and speeding up. To Braden, this is the perfect time to slow his pace, causing Mahoney to appear even faster. Mark and Eddie see themselves catching up to Braden, and they also slow their pace. Mahoney, clearly ahead, widens his lead by a good margin. At the end of the third lap, Mahoney thinks he has the race wrapped up. He has learned not to underestimate Eddie’s tribe, so he sprints as fast as he can. Braden, seriously not wanting to run the half mile in competition, begins to slow his pace even more during the last lap. Eddie and Mark, who are again catching up to Braden, also drop their pace. On the back straightaway, Eddie slows his pace even more, prompting Mark to follow suit. While Eddie and Mark are still on the back straightaway, Mahoney crosses the finish line. Braden, who is just entering the final turn when Mahoney wins, momentarily slows to a fast jog in order to get a slower time. Braden crosses the finish line, eventually followed by Eddie, then Mark.

Mr. Frazier, looking at the times on his stopwatches, meets with Mr. Zunde. They record the times. Mr. Frazier gives the good and bad news, “Mahoney, 2:30. Braden, 2:44. Bogenskaya, 2:49. Svoboda, 2:55.” The announcement comes as a surprise to many, but not to Eddie, Mark, and Braden. Looking at Mark, Mr. Frazier asks, “what happened?” Accustomed to running on a 440-yard track, Mark replies, “the 220-yard track threw me off. I guess I’m not used to it.” Eddie adds, “we never run the 880. I’m not too familiar with the strategy. And, I’m not used to the smaller track either.” Mr. Frazier reassures them, “you’ll get used to it. Don’t worry. You’ll do better next time.” Meanwhile, Mahoney is celebrating and getting high-fives from his teammates. Braden, Eddie, and Mark head over to the bleachers, having their own celebration, and take a seat to

watch the rest of the heats. They are done for now, until the relay practice begins.

Mark mentions to Eddie, "I think that worked." Eddie remarks, "yeah. I'm not running the 880." Braden chimes in, "me neither." Thinking more in depth about the race, Braden adds, "but, I think I could have beaten that guy." Mark comments, "well, Mahoney ran a good race. Hopefully, it'll be his." As they are talking, Mahoney walks by Eddie and his tribe. Braden stands up and gives Mahoney a high-five, and says, "good run, good run!" Eddie and Mark also give Mahoney a high-five. Mahoney, for the first time during tryouts, is in a good mood. Mahoney moves on, not realizing he potentially committed himself to running the 880-yard run, a race of which he does not want any part. Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson were the real winners of this race.

Mr. Frazier calls the group together, having everyone sit on the bleachers. He addresses the group, saying, "we're now going to run relay drills." Instructing the runners how this will be accomplished on the 220-yard track, he tells them, "there will be one group on this side of the track. There will be another group over on the other side of the track." Mr. Frazier describes the drill, explaining, "you will line up, and take turns receiving the baton, run 110 yards, and hand it off, then get in the back of the line." Mr. Frazier then describes what he is expecting to see in the drill, telling the group, "I'm not looking at your speed. I'm only interested in your handoff skills and how well you transfer the baton."

The drill begins with one of the seniors running the requisite 110 yards, and handing the baton off to the next runner. The handoff skill taught by Mr. Frazier is a nonvisual-nonverbal exchange, which is the same technique taught by Mr. Harris at the middle school. Receiving the baton, the next runner runs his 110 yards, and passes the baton along. This drill continues for about five minutes. Once the students get the hang of it, Mr. Frazier calls for another three groups of runners in lanes two, three, and four.

There is no competition for speed in this drill. Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde are making notes regarding each student's handoff skills. Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde are watching how the baton is transferred from one runner to the next, and looking at the runner's feet. Any hesitation or break in the runner's cadence is evidence of a bad handoff. Most of the runners appear to be reasonably skilled at handing off the baton. After the drill, Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde will compare notes to see who has the potential to excel in a relay race. The coaches will then take the time trial data, and form the relay teams. The drill continues for about 30 more minutes.

Mr. Frazier blows his whistle, and tells everyone that the tryouts are done for the day. Mr. Frazier then tells the students, “remember, tomorrow will be the first cut. When you get to school tomorrow, the results will be posted on the window of the administration office. If you have locked in an event, that event will be posted next to your name, and you have made the team. If there is no event next to your name, you have not been cut, but I haven’t decided anything yet.” And then the bad news is delivered, “if your name is not on the list, you have been cut.”

Seeing an event next to your name means you have made the team already. Not having an event next to your name means you are still trying out. Mr. Frazier dismisses the team, and everyone heads to the locker room. Most students, however, already know whether they have made the team or not.

The day of reckoning arrives, with good news waiting for some, and bad news for others. As the busses pull in, anyone who has tried out for a team heads straight to the window of the administration office. Bobby B., who walks to school, has already found out that he’s in. Bobby B. has been sitting in the lobby for a while, waiting for his friends to arrive.

Mark and Braden’s bus arrives, and they walk through the door, not even noticing Bobby B. Bobby B. just sits back and waits for their reactions. Mark and Braden walk up to the list, looking for their name. Almost simultaneously, they scream out, “yes!” They both have made the team. After further examination, Mark sees that he is locked into the 40-yard dash and the 440-yard dash. Braden is locked into the 220-yard dash and the 440-yard dash. These are the events that they each wanted, and they both are ecstatic.

Bobby B. walks up to join Mark and Braden in their celebration. Eddie walks through the door, and heads straight toward the list. Braden and Mark did not even look to see who else may have made the team. They were too busy celebrating. Eddie nervously looks at the list and finds his name. Bursting out in a happy laugh, Eddie exchanges high-fives with his friends. Eddie earned a spot in the 40-yard dash and the 220-yard dash, which is exactly what he wanted.

After they calm down a bit, they look to see who else is on the list. They see that Johnson, who has not yet arrived, has also made the team. Johnson has earned a spot in the 220-yard dash, which is his specialty. Gary Mitchell is locked into the mile and the 880-yard run, which is no surprise to anyone. Looking for Mahoney’s name, Eddie points to the line, taps on the glass, and everyone else looks. Only one event is listed for Mahoney, which is the 880-yard run. Eddie, Mark, and Braden look at each other, and burst out laughing. Their plan worked and it worked well.

Watching bad news walk through the door, the group moves toward the center of the school lobby as Mahoney makes a beeline to the list. Looking at the list, Mahoney exclaims, “son-of-a, crap,” as he punches himself in the thigh and kicks the wall. Eddie, standing twenty feet away with his back to Mahoney, says to the group, “well, he has the rest of the day to calm down.” Braden contends, “yeah, but he ain’t gonna.”

Johnson and Mitchell then walk up to the group. Johnson asks, “did we make it?” Eddie replies, “we did. We don’t want to spoil it for you guys though. Go and check it out!” Johnson and Mitchell run up to the list and, after a quick look, engage in their own celebration. They then walk over to the group, happy to hear that everyone is getting their best news of the year thus far. They all celebrate and talk for a while, and then head off to class.

At the end of the day, the team meets again. Everyone has the routine down by now. Eddie and his buddies go to the locker room, get dressed, and go downstairs to the arena. Today, Mr. Frazier officially announces who will be competing in each event. After he gives everyone the news, he informs the team, “we still have a couple of open slots, and I have not chosen any relay teams yet. You will all get to compete in two or three events each.” Mr. Frazier then announces today’s agenda, “today, we will be running a few specific races to help me make my decision, and I don’t want anyone slacking off.” Mr. Frazier then issues a warning, “for some of you, I have already assigned you to an event. I can remove you from that event just as quickly, so I expect competitive times today, and every day.”

Mr. Frazier instructs the team to warm up. After the warm-ups, he calls Eddie, Mark, Johnson, Braden, Mahoney, and Darryl Bell to meet with him. Mr. Frazier informs the six runners, “I need three sprinters in the 40-yard dash. We’re going to run a race. The best time will be joining Mark and Eddie.” Mr. Frazier then instructs the runners to get ready. While the runners are preparing, Mr. Frazier tells the rest of the students to sit on the bleachers and watch the race. He knows performance improves when one is being watched.

At the other end of the track, Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks.” The room falls silent. The word, “set,” follows. All the runners are set and are as ready as ever. The buzzer sounds, and the runners all leave their blocks, accelerating as fast as they can. Out of the blocks, Eddie and Mark are clearly ahead at ten yards. Johnson, surprisingly, is in third place. Johnson does not want any part of the 880-yard run, so he is giving it his all out best. Mahoney and Braden are right behind Johnson, with Bell in a not so distant last place. Halfway through the five-second race, Eddie and Mark have a good lead, which is adequate to win. No one is likely to catch them. Johnson, thinking about the potential agony of running the 880, is somehow able to find more speed than he ever has.

In third place, Johnson is widening his lead over Mahoney. Braden, passing Mahoney, is willing to let Johnson beat him, but not Mahoney. A few yards before the finish line, Johnson has locked in third place. Eddie and Mark cross the finish line first, which appears to be a tie. Johnson, several steps behind, takes third place. Braden takes fourth place, and Mahoney fifth place. Braden and Mahoney were separated by only a slight margin. Bell, who was supposed to be the number two man this year in the sprinting events, finishes in last place.

At the finish line, Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde were only interested in the times of the top three. Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde record the times, and prepare to make the announcement. Eddie and Mark do not know who won, as the race was very close. Johnson knows that he came in third place, and that's all he cares about. When the runners return to the finish line, Mr. Frazier announces to everyone, "first place was a tie at 4.7 seconds." Whether Eddie or Mark won the heat is immaterial right now. Mr. Frazier is more interested in the runner who took third place. He continues, "in third place is Johnson, who I'm very proud of, with a time of 5.1 seconds."

Mahoney, who finished behind Braden, is not at all happy. This was supposed to be his race, along with Bell. This was Mahoney's second chance at locking in this event, and he has failed. Bell asks Mahoney, "what's up with these guys? Where did they come from?" Mahoney, who was hoping for a scholarship in track, replies, "I have no idea. It looks like I'm going to have a lot of work ahead of me." Disappointed with his own performance, Mahoney exclaims, "I'm not getting a scholarship with these times!" Bell, at a loss to understand where all this new talent came from, is even questioning his own ability. Bell, a junior, and Mahoney, a senior, have both been beaten by four freshmen. They both know that is nothing to be proud of.

Meanwhile, Eddie and Mark congratulate Johnson. Winning this race assures Johnson that he will not have to compete in the 880-yard run. Eddie has locked in the 40-yard dash and the 220-yard dash. Mark will join Eddie in the 40-yard dash, and will also run the 440-yard dash with Braden. Braden and Johnson will be running the 220-yard dash together. With any luck, the four sprinters will land on a relay team together.

Eddie's tribe takes a seat on the bleachers, while Mr. Frazier arranges a few other competitions. Just as they finally have a chance to sit back and relax, trouble comes their way. Mahoney, who is not so happy at the moment, walks up to the tribe, just as they are all ready to watch the rest of the events. Not even knowing how to open the conversation, Mahoney sarcastically asks, "what's up with you guys?" Eddie and his tribe look at each other, not knowing how to even answer Mahoney's question. Eddie, who remembers the encounter with Ambrosini on the football field and

how Ambrosini and Mahoney seem to talk a lot, answers, “we’re the tribe, that’s what’s up.” Braden adds, “yeah, the tribe, dude.” Johnson, who just defeated Mahoney, adds his two cents, saying, “and, the tribe always wins.” Mark, not wanting to feel left out of the highly intellectual discussion, comments, “if you want to be in the tribe, you got to win. But, you can’t win unless you’re in the tribe.”

Mark’s circular logic left everyone pondering the great depth of his philosophy. Mahoney, somewhat frustrated, exclaims, “don’t you guys take anything seriously?” Braden, hammering his fist on the bleachers, responds quickly and firmly, telling Mahoney, “yeah, we do! Winning!” Quite startled, Mahoney walks away after Braden gave him something to think about. Braden’s words of wisdom, “winning,” will echo through Mahoney’s mind for weeks to come.

After a while, Bobby B. and Mitchell wander over to join the group. Their day is over, as the competition begins to wind down. Mitchell mentions to the group, “I’m glad I’m running the 880.” Mark asks, “I saw you running. What was your time?” Mitchell replies, “I ran a 2:20. Two seconds faster than the last time I was on the track. I came in first place.” Eddie asks, “what did Mahoney run when he ran it with us?” Braden replies, “ten seconds faster than me.” Eddie asks Braden, “well, duh! What did you run, bro?” Braden replies, “a 2:44, I think.” Mitchell says, “I beat Mahoney by fifteen seconds today.” Mitchell is as happy as he can be, knowing he is going to be a solid competitor in that event. Mitchell has no problem running 880 yards. A half mile is a cake walk for the five-star miler.

Mr. Frazier announces that the tryouts are done for today. He reminds everyone, “check the list tomorrow morning. It will be posted in the same place. Tomorrow’s list will have the final team, and your events. However, not all the relay events will be decided by tomorrow.” Mr. Frazier explains his strategy, telling the team, “some relay teams may also change from meet to meet, like we did last year.” Mr. Frazier, who is well aware of the competition, will often change the relay team members to gain an advantage. The team heads to the locker room, with their fate already sealed after today’s events. Many will be waiting anxiously for tomorrow’s news.

The final team roster is posted in the window the next morning. Bobby B., again arriving before everyone else, looks over the list. The final roster is not too much different from the previous day’s list. Mark and Braden arrive, curious to see if there are any changes. The only change to their entry is “4x440” written next to their names, which stands for the 4 by 440 relay. Looking to see who else is on the 4 by 440 relay team, they find Eddie’s and Johnson’s names, who both just happen to be walking up. The newly assembled relay team celebrates, with cheers and

high-fives. They move away from the roster, as other students search for their names.

Mahoney enters the school, casually walking up to the list with a walk suggestive that he's on top of the world. Looking at the roster, he finds his name and notices there are no changes next to his name. Looking for his buddy's name, Darryl Bell, he also notices no changes. With no additional events next to his name, Mahoney will be an alternate to some events, or will be on various relay teams. Somewhat confused, he starts looking through the final roster, name by name. Mahoney is perplexed that the prestigious 4 by 440 relay event was assigned to four freshmen. He decides that he will question Mr. Frazier later today about that decision.

Later that day, practice arrives and the team meets in the normal place. The team is addressed by Mr. Frazier, who goes over today's agenda. Mr. Frazier informs the students, "today, we will be running relay events for time. If you have already been assigned to a relay event, you will be running first." Then the interesting news is announced, "if you have not been assigned to a relay event, you will be running relays for time for the rest of the day."

As Mr. Frazier addresses the team, Mr. O'Brien, and his son, Jimmy, who is in uniform and ready to run, walk down the stairs and take a seat on the bleachers. Jimmy, a bit too inept to be embarrassed, has been cut from the team, but still shows up to practice. Closing his instruction, Mr. Frazier tells the 4 by 440 relay team to get ready.

As the team prepares to run the 4 by 440 relay for time, Mr. O'Brien approaches Mr. Frazier and asks, "coach, how come Jimmy didn't make your team?" Brushing off the question by stating hard and cold facts, Mr. Frazier tells Mr. O'Brien, "he's simply not fast enough." Mr. O'Brien, not accepting of Mr. Frazier's answer, begins to argue with Mr. Frazier, which is a big mistake. Mr. Frazier, who does not argue, finally asks Mr. O'Brien, "so, please tell me. What event do you want Jimmy to run?" Mr. O'Brien replies, "the 440-yard run is his favorite event. He really likes the distance races." The 440-yard dash is hardly a distance race, making Mr. O'Brien sound a bit like an inept imbecile himself.

Mr. Frazier blows his whistle, causing dead silence to fall over the track. Mr. Frazier announces, "Svoboda, Bogenskaya, Braden, Johnson, and Mahoney, get over here right now!" The five runners jog over to Mr. Frazier, wondering what is going on. Calling the runners off to the side, Mr. Frazier tells them, "you'll be running the 440-yard dash with Jimmy O'Brien." Mr. Frazier then whispers to them, "kick his ass, and kick it hard!" Mr. Frazier tells the five team members and Jimmy O'Brien to get behind the blocks, and prepare to run a 440-yard dash. Not that it will

make any difference, Mr. Frazier even lets Jimmy choose his lane. Braden, looking over at Jimmy, asks him, “are you ready for your ass kicking, junior?” Braden remembers quite well from last year how Jimmy O’Brien was always dragging the team down.

Mr. Frazier reminds everyone, “440 yards is two laps. The way the blocks are set, you are to stay in your lane for the entire race. Do not leave your lane! O’Brien, do you got that?” O’Brien confidently replies, “yeah.” Mr. Frazier wants O’Brien running in his own lane during the entire race, so he does not cause a collision on the track. Wasting no time, Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks,” followed by, “set.” Once everyone is set, Mr. Frazier hits the buzzer.

Braden is out of the blocks first, with a very obvious false start, but Mr. Frazier does not care. In the first few yards, Braden is in first place, with Eddie, Mark, Johnson, and Mahoney slightly behind. Jimmy, as he enters the first turn, sees the other runners already well into the back straightaway. Johnson and Braden appear to be leading. Because of the staggering, however, it is difficult to know who is actually ahead. Coming into the second curve, the placement becomes more evident. Jimmy, who is entering the back straightaway, watches the group come out of the second curve. At the end of the first lap, it is Braden, followed by Eddie, Mark, Johnson, and Mahoney, in that order. Only three or four seconds separate the five front runners. Meanwhile, O’Brien, who is still in the back straightaway, begins to tire, slowing to a fast jog. As O’Brien enters the second turn, the pack is well into the back straightaway on their second lap, ready to catch him. O’Brien, still on his first lap, is about to be embarrassingly passed by the pack. Braden, who is ahead, appears like he will be definitely winning this one.

To Braden, however, winning is not enough. He wants to win by a significant margin. Braden sees O’Brien flailing, and wants to cross the finish line before O’Brien completes his first lap. O’Brien, just coming out of the curve, is in Braden’s sites. Braden, halfway through the final curve, gives it all he has. Coming out of the curve and into the final straightaway, Braden sprints toward the finish line, and just edges out O’Brien, who has just completed lap one of a two-lap race. Two seconds later Eddie crosses the finish line. He is followed by Mark, Johnson, and Mahoney, in that order. O’Brien, who is determined to complete the race, finishes his last lap alone.

Once O’Brien crosses the finish line, Mr. Frazier looks at his two stopwatches, and wastes no time making the announcement, “the winning time is 54.1 seconds! Jimmy O’Brien, your time is 2:25, which sucks!” Mr. Frazier exclaims, “O’Brien, you took more time to run a quarter mile than Mitchell takes to run a half mile! And Braden just ran 440 yards faster than you can run 220 yards!” Mr. Frazier, all fired up, looks at Mr. O’Brien,

and yells at him, stating, “and, that is exactly why Jimmy got cut!” After blowing his whistle to get everyone’s attention, Mr. Frazier tells the mile medley relay team to get ready to run the event for time. Changing the agenda, he gives Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson a chance to rest after demonstrating to Jimmy O’Brien how to run.

Hoping that something will change, Mr. O’Brien and Jimmy hang around for a while. After a few minutes, they walk up the steel staircase, somewhat disappointed. Jimmy will have to wait until the Spring if he wants to try out for track again. If he does, he will have to do a lot more than just show up to practice and expect to make the team. Between now and then, he will have to be training, not sitting around watching television or taking it easy. With Jimmy, this is not likely to be the case. But, either way, the standard for making the team has been set.

After a few relay races, Mr. Frazier calls Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson to run the 4 by 440 relay. Paul Mahoney, idle at the moment, sees the group setting up. This was supposed to be one of Mahoney’s events, as it has been during the last two years. Mahoney, who wants to discuss with Mr. Frazier his 4 by 440 relay team selection, approaches the coach and asks, “is there any reason why I didn’t make the 4 by 440?” Mr. Frazier responds, “no. Your times are good enough for any relay team.” Mr. Frazier continues, elaborating, “these four guys, for some reason, run better and faster when they are together.” Mahoney, a veteran on the team, responds, “yeah, I’ve noticed that.” Making Mahoney an offer, Mr. Frazier tells him, “if you can put together a team who can beat them, I’d be glad to rearrange things and let your team run that event.” Mr. Frazier could not have handled that situation any better. Mahoney walks away thinking about who could beat Mr. Frazier’s 4 by 440 relay team. Mr. Frazier then steps off to the side, and talks to Mr. Zunde for a few minutes as the 4 by 440 relay team warms up.

Turning his attention back to the 4 by 440 relay team, Mr. Frazier asks, “are you guys ready?” Braden replies, “yeah. But, what order do you want us to go in?” Mr. Frazier, remembering the relay team well from the final middle school track meet of last year, tells them, “we’ll start with the same order you ran last year.” Mr. Frazier does not remember in which order the relay team previously ran. He is sure that Mr. Harris, the middle school track coach, had his reasons for that order. Last year, Braden was the lead off man, followed by Johnson, then Eddie, and lastly the anchorman, Mark.

Braden, the lead man, is ready, as Eddie, Mark, and Johnson finish some last minute stretching. Mr. Frazier announces, “on your marks.” Running up, and interrupting Mr. Frazier, Mahoney exclaims, “I got a team who’ll beat them!” This is exactly what Mr. Frazier wants to hear, competition and a challenge. Mr. Frazier asks the 4 by 440 relay team,

“are you guys okay with that?” Eddie and Mark, standing off to the side with their arms crossed, nod yes. Johnson replies, “sure.” Braden, a bit more vocal, breaking into a dance and pointing the baton at Mahoney, cries out, “bring it on! Bring it on, junior! Ain’t nobody stoppin’ me now! Just bring it on! Bring it on! It’s ass kicking time, and I’m ready!” This is exactly what Mr. Frazier was talking about when he told Mahoney, “these four guys, for some reason, run better and faster when they are together.”

Mahoney waves to the runners he selected, which includes Darryl Bell, Anthony Ambrosini, and Louis Zaino. Mr. Frazier looks Mahoney’s team over, and tells them to get ready. Eddie also evaluates the team, and comments to Mark, “Ambrosini again? Really?” Johnson asks, “who’s that other guy?” Mark replies, “Zaino. He’s really good, but we’re better. Don’t worry.” Eddie, Mark, and Johnson are now confident in their ability to beat Mahoney’s team. Braden, on the other hand, was already confident. Zaino walks up to the starting line, and will be Mahoney’s lead off man. Eddie, catching Braden’s eye, gives him a thumbs up.

Mr. Frazier makes the announcement, “on your marks.” Braden, behind the blocks, spins on one foot, gracefully becomes airborne, and lands in front of the blocks. He then positions himself to get set on Mr. Frazier’s command. Mr. Frazier, who can hardly contain his laugh, announces, “set.” Both runners get set and are ready to go. Mr. Frazier hits the buzzer and the runners explode out of the blocks.

Braden, who is out of the blocks first, is clearly ahead after 50 yards. Halfway around the track, on the back straightaway, it is evident that Braden is extending his lead over Zaino. As Braden approaches the starting line, Eddie yells out to Braden, “faster, faster.” On the last lap of his leg, Braden pours on all he has. Zaino, although a reasonably good runner, is no match for Braden today, who is more than fired up. On the back straightaway, Braden again widens his lead over Zaino. Coming around the final curve, Braden eyes Johnson, who is waiting for the baton. Next to Johnson is Ambrosini, who has already had the pleasure of competing against, and losing to, Johnson. The transition between Braden and Johnson goes perfectly, and Johnson takes off. Just as Johnson enters the first curve, Ambrosini receives his baton.

Johnson, unfamiliar with Ambrosini’s ability in the 440, does not want to be passed. On the back straightaway, Johnson sprints and, upon entering the curve, sees that Ambrosini has not gained any ground. Johnson runs both laps of his 440-yard leg as if he is running a 220-yard dash. On the second lap, it appears that Johnson has gained significant ground over Ambrosini. As Johnson approaches the transition zone, Eddie is waiting, and ready to go. So is Bell, who is a better opponent than the previous two runners on Mahoney’s team. Eddie leaves the

transition zone running like a machine. Bell receives his baton as Eddie comes out of the first curve.

Back at the starting line, Mark mentions to Braden something about déjà vu. Braden asks Mark, “déjà what?” Mark replies, as he is watching Eddie gain ground over Bell, “McCrutchen. Remember that guy from last year?” Braden, remembering that race, says, “oh, yeah! That guy.” Before Mark can explain, Mr. Frazier walks up to Mark and Braden, and informs Braden, “you will be running the anchor leg.” Mark, somewhat perplexed, replies, “what?” Mr. Frazier tells Mark, “I’ll explain later,” and tells Braden to get back on the track. Equally perplexed, Braden enters the track a second time.

Back on the track, Eddie and Bell fight it out, both trying to gain a better advantage for their respective anchorman. After the first lap, Eddie has gained a little ground over Bell. During his second lap, Eddie, who does not want to lose his position on the relay team, sprints the last 220 yards as if he is running the 40-yard dash. He does not care that he might burn himself out. For Bell, however, there is already too much ground to make up to win the leg or the race. Coming out of the final curve, Eddie, expecting to see Mark, sees Braden in the transition zone instead. With the switch, Eddie is wondering what’s up. Eddie hands off to Braden, who is running his second 440-yard dash within four minutes. Mahoney receives his baton 23 seconds later.

Mr. Frazier takes Mark aside, telling him, “you still have your spot on the relay team, so don’t worry.” Mr. Frazier explains to Mark, “they’ve challenged your team, and this is how I defend my decision.” Mark quickly figured out that, if Braden beats Mahoney, Mr. Frazier will not be questioned again. Mark also understands that, if Braden wins this leg, Mahoney will be totally embarrassed.

Braden maintains his significant lead for the first lap. If Braden wins, Mahoney knows he will have a truck load of egg on his face that will look as if it were placed there by a jet engine. Mahoney, with all he has, tries to catch Braden. Entering the second lap, Braden begins to drop his pace a little, but is still running at a highly competitive speed. On the back straightaway, Mahoney is closing in on Braden’s lead. Mahoney wants this win but, even if he wins, he has lost. Braden, however, refuses to be beaten by Mahoney. Around the final curve, Braden finds a third wind and sprints toward the finish line. Mahoney, coming out of the curve, also sprints toward the finish line. Mahoney, however, does not have enough distance remaining to catch Braden. At the finish line, Braden crosses first, with Mahoney crossing fourteen seconds later.

Mr. Frazier, even more amazed at the 4 by 440 relay team’s performance, didn’t even look at the time on his stopwatch. The time did

not matter, for it was not a valid time nor a valid race. What is valid is that the 4 by 440 relay team, with one fatigued and burned-out runner, still beat Mahoney's team. Braden was apparently correct, when he said a few days ago, that he could have beaten Mahoney in the half mile.

After catching his breath, Braden rejoins the rest of the 4 by 440 relay team. Braden gives a high-five to each of the other three team members, along with his very vocal celebration. Braden exclaims, "ain't no one beating the tribe, no one! We're kicking ass!" Focusing his attention toward Mahoney, Braden exclaims, "I kicked your puny little ass, not once, but twice! And I'm gonna kick it again and again, junior!" Mahoney has no business responding to Braden, for he has been beaten, and beaten badly.

After Braden's rant, Mr. Frazier looks over at Mahoney, and says absolutely nothing. Nothing had to be said. At times, silence conveys more than if words were used. This was one of those times. Today, Mahoney learned why Mr. Frazier is the coach. It is unlikely that Mahoney will be questioning Mr. Frazier anytime soon.

Braden's dramatically increased enthusiasm is almost contagious. After watching Braden run, anyone running next is blessed with a higher energy level. Mr. Frazier congratulates the relay team, and apologizes to Mark and the 4 by 440 relay team for not allowing Mark to run his leg for this time trial. Mr. Frazier then informs the 4 by 440 relay team that they do not need to prove themselves by running for time. Mr. Frazier already knows that no other combination of runners on the team can match their performance level.

After a few more races, and running laps for training, Mr. Frazier then instructs the team to sit on the bleachers as he reviews the team's performance. Mr. Frazier goes over each event, telling the runners what is good and what areas may need improvement. As he is speaking to his team, three very athletic looking girls walk down the metal staircase and sit with the team on the bleachers. Mr. Frazier then makes the announcement to the team which runners will be performing in each relay event during the upcoming meet.

When he is finished discussing the events, Mr. Frazier announces, "Barbara, Kathy, and Paula, please come up here." The three girls walk up to Mr. Frazier and stand beside him. Mr. Frazier continues, "many of you know Kathy and Barbara from last year. This year, they are joined by Paula. They are my spies." Mr. Frazier, explaining further what the three girls do, tells the team, "they snoop around, flirting when necessary, to get any information they can for me. If they flirt around with you during the meet, play along! They're also part of the team. Their job is to distract the competition in any way they can." Mr. Frazier then gives the

team some final words of wisdom for the day, “and most important, do not let Kathy, Paula, or Barbara distract you when you are running!”

Mr. Frazier finishes by telling the team what the three girls really do, “Kathy, Barbara, and Paula are my team assistants. The majority of what they do is to gather information about the competition during the meets. They are our team statisticians. They will be working closely with you over the next several weeks. Barbara will be working with the distance group. Kathy and Paula will be working primarily with the sprinters. Pay very close attention to what they tell you. You might actually learn something.”

With all of the preliminary work out of the way, Mr. Frazier and the team can now get down to serious training. The team members have been selected and the events have been decided. With the first meet only a week away, now it’s time to train. Eddie and his tribe are not content with just training during track practice. They also do some extra training on their own. This is what sets Eddie and his tribe apart from many other members of the team.

After Mr. Frazier has finished addressing the team, everyone heads to the locker room. On the way to the locker room, Eddie joins up with Braden and Mark, who are discussing the 4 by 440 relay. Mark, joking with Braden, tells him, “hey! Thanks for running my leg, and for giving me the day off.” Eddie joins in the conversation, telling Braden, “if you want, you can run my leg next time.” Braden, not missing out on the fun, says, “yeah! And I’ll also run Johnson’s leg if I’m up against those guys, and I’ll still win!” Braden’s confidence is well backed by his performance. Not too many can make that claim, and then deliver.

On the way to the locker room, Mahoney mentions to Bell that he is interested in Kathy, one of Mr. Frazier’s team assistants. Mahoney says to Bell, “at the end of the Spring season last year, I wanted to ask Kathy out on a date, but it never happened. Over the Summer, well, I didn’t know where she lived.” Bell pointing out the obvious to Mahoney, replies, “well, how about this year?” Mahoney, as if he were struck by lightning, points out the obvious to himself and Bell, “that’s a good point. I could ask her out this year!” Bell responds, “duh! But, will you?” Mahoney tells Bell, “I’m definitely going to ask her out this year.” Whether Mahoney asks Kathy out on a date or not this year is yet to be seen. But, since Mahoney failed on the track, perhaps he can succeed elsewhere.

With the team selected, and most of the events filled, the rest of the semester will bring practice and meets. Now, the real competition begins. Out of the many students who tried out for the team, the best have been identified. The best will now compete against the best. The last few days will prove to be a cake walk compared with the competition that is ahead.

