

Eddie, The Senior Year

Chapter Three The Indoor Season

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The first meet of the year is on a Saturday, which seems to be an annual tradition. Since New Year's Day fell on a Thursday, the indoor season started a little late this year. The annual match-up between Northside, Riverdale, Centerville, and Madison is no different this year, except that Riverdale and Centerville are really tired of getting their ass kicked. In an attempt to change things, the other teams have also hired interns from the local colleges and universities to help with their training. Even Madison, the basement dweller, has searched for ways to improve their performance in the last few months. Mr. Frazier, however, still wants all of the gold medals, which now seems to be his yearly tradition.

Centerville's coach, Mr. Ruff, is on the warpath. He has had enough of the recent controversies, but will nevertheless look for trouble wherever he can. Centerville's star sprinter, Todd McCutchen, is in his senior year, and has a score to settle with Mark. It is not likely that McCutchen will ever beat Mark at anything, but he's sure to try.

The Riverdale coach, Mr. Lyons, usually has a good team, but nowhere near as good as Northside. Mr. Lyons, who usually walks away with the bulk of the second place medals in the relay events in this yearly match up, has vowed to step up his game.

For Northside, the event assignments have been finalized, and the team members are strong in their assigned events. The team plans to sweep the meet as they did last year.

Before heading out to the arena, Mr. Frazier calls a brief team meeting in the locker room where he cannot be overheard. Once everyone is dressed and assembled, Mr. Frazier announces, "I hear that the competition is better this year, but I have no first-hand knowledge of this. When we get out there, I want you to remember only one thing. That is, if

you don't win, all the work you've done to get here doesn't matter." The team cheers, agreeing with their coach 100 percent.

Mentioning one other thing, Mr. Frazier adds, "they say 'it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game.' I say, if it doesn't matter, they wouldn't keep score!" The team cheers again, and everyone is ready to win. Mr. Frazier tells the team, "okay, let's get out there and do exactly what we've been training for!"

Walking into the arena, the team settles at their bench. As the other teams arrive, the bleachers are filling with spectators. Among the spectators today is Dr. Noreen Brooks, the school superintendent. For some unknown reason, Mr. Crum, the principal, sneaks in to watch today's meet. Fortunately, for Mr. Crum, there is no discus thrown in indoor track. Mr. Zunde would normally kick Mr. Crum out of his arena but, since Dr. Brooks is present, Mr. Crum is not likely to cause any problems. So, only for today, Mr. Zunde allows Mr. Crum to stay for the meet. Also present today is the football coach, Mr. Moreno, who is looking for a running back or free safety. Wanting to see how far his former athletes have come, Mr. Harris, the middle school track coach, is also attending the meet today. And, for some odd reason, sitting in the bleachers is Jimmy O'Brien, along with his father.

The first meet of the year is when each coach demonstrates to the division the talent that they have. Word travels fast, and Mr. Frazier is eager to show everyone what he has this year. The competing teams, also expecting to show what they have, arrive this year with a few new trainers. Among them, working for Centerville, is Brad Evans. Evans, as it was discovered by Mr. Frazier and Barbara, ran for Centerville a few years ago, and is now working for the team as an intern. Evans walks around, maintaining his distance from the other team's benches, taking a look at the competition.

Kathy, Paula, and Barbara, however, are not walking around analyzing the competition. While the other teams are getting settled, the three University teammates race against each other in a 220-yard dash just for fun. This, of course, attracts a lot of attention, especially that of Mr. Ruff. Mr. Ruff clearly knows the girls are not eligible to run, so his blood pressure is rising. Seeing the girls dressed in the team uniform, Mr. Ruff is on his way to blowing a gasket. Sure enough, after the girls race, as Kathy, Paula, and Barbara are walking back to the team bench, Mr. Ruff is yelling at the ceiling, throwing his hands in the air.

As usual, in indoor track, the 40-yard dash preliminaries is the first event of the day. Running for Northside High School will be Eddie, Hoffer, and Eddie's brother, John. It is no secret that they will be up against McCutchen. Mark reminds Eddie about their encounter with McCutchen

last Summer on the beach when Mark messed with McCutchen and his teammate's minds. Eddie and Mark discuss a few of the ways they will distract McCutchen this year. Mark tells Eddie to remind McCutchen that, on this track, they have switched to metric time this season. Kathy and Paula are both in on the plan, which will make everything sound more official. Mark will save his ace in the hole for the 4 by 440 relay.

The call for the 40-yard dash preliminaries is made, and the runners head to the starting line. Kathy and Paula join the three contestants, as Mr. Frazier makes his way to the finish line. Eddie points out McCutchen to John. John has heard about McCutchen, and can't wait to see the ways in which Eddie and Mark mess with his head. Eddie and Hoffer are in the first heat. John, an unseeded runner, will be in the second heat. With a few minutes before the race, the Starter, who is familiar with Northside's psychological warfare, listens closely to hear what distraction techniques the team has come up with this year.

As McCutchen walks up to the starting line with his teammates, Kathy tells John, "remember, we're using metric stopwatches this year, so you don't have to run as fast to get a good time." Eddie, acting as if he overheard Kathy's comment, mentions, "that's right! Thanks! I almost forgot about that."

Sure enough, McCutchen asks Eddie, "what's all this about a metric stopwatch?" Eddie explains, "I can't believe you guys haven't heard about that. They're changing over to metric time this year in a lot of the meets. Instead of 60 minutes in one hour, there are 100 minutes in one hour. Also, instead of 60 seconds in a minute, there are 100 seconds in a minute. But, the tenths are still the same." McCutchen asks, "what difference does that make?" Eddie tells him, "your times will seem slower. So, you don't have to run as fast to get a good time. Do the conversions in your head. You'll see." Eddie just gave McCutchen a bunch of conflicting information, which is sure to wear his brain out before the gun goes off. The Starter, listening to every word, has to turn around to conceal his laughter.

The Starter tells the first heat to get ready, and Kathy heads over to the finish line to be there when Eddie wins. The Starter grins, and tells Eddie, "I bought a metric starting pistol this year. You'll see it in the Spring." Eddie asks, "does it make a metric sound?" The Starter tells Eddie, "it does. And, metric sound travels a little faster, so you guys will be out of the blocks quicker." Eddie and the Starter have a good laugh, clearly noticed by Mr. Ruff over at the finish line. The Starter announces, "on your marks," then announces, "set." The buzzer sounds, marking the beginning of this year's indoor track season and the race.

Eddie is out of the blocks first, and takes an early lead. No one else has broken from the rest of the field ten yards into the race. McCutchen, still wondering about metric time, was distracted before the race began. At twenty yards, Hoffer breaks from the pack. McCutchen, right behind Hoffer, is surprisingly a little faster this year. At the finish line, Eddie crosses first, leaving the rest of the pack far behind. Hoffer takes second place, and McCutchen third place. One of the Timekeepers, speaking of Eddie, mentions to another, "wow! That was seriously fast!"

The second heat quickly gets ready. This is John's debut performance. Kathy makes sure John's blocks are set correctly, allowing John to focus on the race. The Starter announces, "on your marks," then announces, "set." The buzzer is sounded, and the second heat is out of the blocks.

John takes an early lead, quickly breaking from the pack, following in the footsteps of his brother. The rest of the pack is left far behind. At the finish line, the second heat appears to have been a one man race. John wins his heat, with his competition crossing the finish line far behind him. Mr. Frazier, giving John a high-five, tells him, "congratulations! You made it into the final!" John and Mr. Frazier head back to the bench, awaiting to see who else will be in the final.

After a few more events, the call is made for the 440-yard dash. For Northside, Braden, Tessa, and Erika will be running this race. Tessa and Erika always have a bit of a rivalry going on. Closely matched in ability, either one could win the race if Braden was not running.

As he is heading toward the starting line, Braden exclaims, "I don't even know why they keep making me run the same race! I always win! I'm kicking ass today! Ain't nobody in this State faster than me!" Seeing Mr. Crum in the bleachers, remembering that he has no jurisdiction on the track, Braden yells out louder, "I'm kicking everyone's ass today!" Braden, seeing Jimmy O'Brien and his father in the bleachers, points to Jimmy O'Brien, exclaiming, "and, keep your puny little ass out of my way, junior!" After listening to Braden, everyone knows this is going to be an exciting race.

The Starter announces, "on your marks." The Starter then announces, "set." Braden is more than ready to go. The buzzer sounds and, continuing in the Amazon tradition, Tessa and Erika both let out a loud Amazon war cry.

Braden, in lane one, takes no time to claim the lead. Halfway through the race, after the first lap, Erika is in second place, with Tessa not far behind. Bobby B., standing in the middle of the oval track where the field events are held, watches as Erika, his girlfriend, is delivering an awesome

performance. As they come around the final curve and approach the finish, Braden will clearly win the race. Erika and Tessa fight it out for second place. Braden takes first place, delivering exactly what he promised. Erika, who beats Tessa this time by only one step, takes second place. But, delivering an awesome performance today, Tessa is happy with third place.

Once the race is over, Braden still apparently has a lot of energy. Braden exclaims, "I just kicked everyone's ass in the State again! And, I'm going to do it again! And again! Who's next? Step right up!" Even though there is a second heat, it's not likely that anyone will come close to Braden's performance. Mr. Frazier gives Braden a high-five, telling him, "I clocked you at a 47.5! Awesome!" Tessa and Erika walk over, also receiving high-fives from their coach, Kathy, and Paula. Kathy tells Erika she ran a 54.4, and Paula tells Tessa she ran a 54.5. Mr. Frazier is ecstatic with the times but, with one more heat to go, it is not known where Erika and Tessa will place.

After a few more events, the call is made for the 40-yard dash final. Eddie, Hoffer, and John all head to the starting line. McCutchen made the final, along with one of his teammates and a runner from Riverdale. No one from Madison made the final, which has come to be expected.

Eddie tells McCutchen, "hey, this is my brother John. I just wanted you to meet him." McCutchen, at a loss for words, replies, "I didn't know you had a brother." Eddie tells McCutchen, "yeah. And, by the way, I met your older brother last semester at the University." McCutchen asks, "oh yeah? How did you meet him?" Eddie tells him, "I ran against him in the 440-yard dash time trial with the University's team last Fall. I kicked his ass. So did Mark, Kathy, and Paula." Hearing that news certainly destroys McCutchen's confidence in the upcoming final.

The Starter tells the runners, "on your marks," which comes as a surprise to McCutchen, who was busy talking with Eddie. Eddie, however, is more than ready to get this race over with. Eddie tells his brother, "good luck. You and Hoffer should take second and third place." Eddie's comment further bothers McCutchen, who was just informed by Eddie that he will lose. The Starter announces, "set." Once the runners are set, the buzzer sounds.

Almost everyone is quick out of the blocks. It appears one of the runners was caught off guard, getting off to a slow start. At 20 yards, the pack separates into three groups. Eddie is alone in the first group. Hoffer and John are in the second group. The third group, led by McCutchen, is a few yards behind. At the finish line, Eddie takes first place. Hoffer takes second place, with Eddie's brother, John, taking third place.

With the 40-yard dash final completed, Eddie and Mark walk over to compete in the shot-put. This comes as a surprise to Mr. Ruff, the Centerville coach, who has had about all he can take from Northside. Although the rumor has been dispelled, Mr. Ruff somehow still thinks Bobby B. is a college student, and throwing the shot-put is how he makes his tuition money. Seeing Eddie and Mark competing in the shot-put just seems to irritate Mr. Ruff. This is because, with Eddie and Mark on the shot-put pad, Centerville will likely be excluded from winning anything in that event today.

Bobby B. shows Eddie the shot-put, telling him, "remember, the shot-put is special, and it must be treated with great care. Be very careful with it." Eddie replies, "you got it, bro." Eddie steps up to the shot-put pad, handling the shot-put more like the steel ball that it is rather than the special field implement Bobby B. makes it out to be. After making his first throw, Eddie quickly moves into second place. Beating the competing teams by a significant margin, Eddie asks Bobby B., "so, how's that?" Bobby B. jokingly replies, "not bad, if you were a freshman." Eddie is now in second place, not bad for his first competitive throw.

Mark is up next. On his way to the shot-put pad, Mark asks the Centerville shot-put guy, "hey, have you seen the shot-put around here somewhere? They told me I have to throw it." Not amused in the least, the Centerville shot-put guy points to the shot-put laying on the ground, telling Mark, "it's right there." Picking up the shot-put, Mark tells the Centerville shot-put guy, "wow! It's really heavy." Mark makes his first throw, clearly giving the competition the impression he's done this at least once before. Mark's throw comes in a few inches shy of Eddie's first throw. As expected, the Centerville shot-put guy is annoyed by Mark. And, so is Mr. Ruff, but that is par for the course.

Eddie and Mark make their requisite three throws, easily taking second and third place in this event. Neither Eddie nor Mark expected to beat Bobby B. in the shot-put. With a throw that could easily take the gold medal at the State invitational meet, Bobby B. took first place today. The goal for Eddie and Mark today was to secure second and third place, which they easily accomplished.

In other events, Mitchell takes first place in the mile. Johnson takes second place, and Akinmola takes third place. Mark takes first place in the 220-yard dash. John Elliot takes second place, and a freshman, Lucius Hill, takes third place. Akinmola is in the lead in the high jump, and expects to win.

Mr. Frazier, to say the least, is ecstatic. Thus far, in this meet, Northside has taken first, second, and third place in every individual running event. This, of course, sorely irritates Mr. Ruff, whose team

expected to do a lot better this year. And, the Riverdale coach, Mr. Lyons is not too happy either. Usually taking second and third place in a few individual events, thus far, Mr. Lyons is empty handed. Fortunately, with a few more relay events coming up and, with only one entry allowed per school, Northside cannot take first, second, and third place.

The last event of the day is the 4 by 440 relay. This year, the relay team's standard order is Braden, who is the lead man, followed by Johnson, then Mark, with Eddie being the anchorman. The order, however is subject to change. Today, Mark will be running in whichever leg McCutchen is running. And, if Braden finds a specific ass he wants to kick, Mr. Frazier will allow the team to change the order. With four runners capable of running a sub-50 second quarter mile, the order doesn't really matter too much. They will likely win every 4 by 440 relay competition this year.

The call is made for the final event of the day. Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson head to the starting line along with Mr. Frazier, Kathy, Paula, Barbara, and Wendy. With a few minutes before the race starts, Mark tells Braden and Johnson to stand off to the side, along with Wendy and Barbara, and act like they are not running in the race. Mark tells Kathy and Paula, who are dressed in the team uniform, to stand on the track with him and Eddie. Mr. Frazier, clearly understanding what Mark is up to, laughs to himself, wondering how Mark comes up with this stuff.

Mark's rearrangement of the personnel causes an immediate objection by Mr. Ruff, who saw the girls running a practice race before the meet began. Mr. Ruff tells Mr. Lyons, "will you just look at that! Those two girls graduated last year, and here they are again! They're not eligible to run!" Mr. Lyons, seeing what Mr. Ruff sees, replies, "we've got to report this. They've gone far enough. This is just too blatant!"

Since the starting line is near the bleachers, Mr. Crum cannot help but to overhear the turmoil. It clearly appears that, from every vantage point, the gold medal team of Mark, Paula, Kathy, and Eddie are about to run the 4 by 440 relay. And, to complicate matters, the Amazon chant begins, originating from someone in the bleachers.

Mr. Ruff and Mr. Lyons approach the Head Timekeeper, and voice their objection. Mr. Ruff, telling the Head Timekeeper in no uncertain terms, "those two girls are not eligible to run! They've graduated!" The Timekeeper, who does not have the official event roster in his hands, tells Mr. Ruff and Mr. Lyons, "I'll check into it."

Before the Timekeeper can go and obtain the roster, Mr. Crum, hearing the heated discussion, comes down from the bleachers. Mr. Crum joins in the discussion, telling the Timekeeper, "I'm the principal of this

school. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. And yes, this gentleman is correct. Those two girls graduated last year. I can attest to that fact myself." Mr. Ruff exclaims, "see that! I knew it!" The Timekeeper then excuses himself to locate the official event roster.

Meanwhile, in the center of the oval track, Mr. Frazier, standing with Mark, Eddie, Kathy, and Paula, comments, "wow! Listen to them. It sounds like they're a little upset." Mr. Zunde, seeing the commotion, walks over from the field area, wondering what is going on. Mr. Frazier tells Mr. Zunde, "Mark had last year's relay team stand together, making it look like they are ready to run the 4 by 440. Mr. Ruff and Lyons saw it, and jumped to the wrong conclusion. They're both ready to blow a gasket. Now, Mr. Crum has gotten involved." Mr. Zunde, who always likes this kind of amusement, tells Mr. Frazier, "let's see how far they take it. This should be quite entertaining." Mr. Frazier tells Mr. Zunde, "you've really got to hand it to Mark. This is his best one yet."

To add fuel to the fire, Mark suggests, "hey, let's practice a few handoffs, like the good 'ole days!" Last year's 4 by 440 relay champions think that's a great idea, so Kathy walks over to Wendy, and gets the baton. Kathy and Paula get on the track, showing off their handoff skills. Kathy hands off to Eddie, as they have many times before in practice and in competition. Mark, looking over at Mr. Ruff, gets the evil eye. Mark smiles, as he takes the baton and hands off to Paula.

Mr. Crum, seeing the girls practicing their handoffs, knows for sure something is amiss. Wanting to be the star of the show and in the spotlight, Mr. Crum tells Mr. Ruff, and Mr. Lyons, "I'll take care of this." Mr. Crum approaches Mr. Frazier, telling him, "the girls are not eligible to run! They've graduated last year!" Mr. Frazier replies, "don't you think I know that?" Mr. Crum exclaims, "then, get them off the track!" Mr. Frazier quietly asks, "why?" In no uncertain terms, Mr. Crum tells Mr. Frazier, "because they're not allowed to run!" Mr. Frazier tells Mr. Crum, "you already said that. So, what's your point?"

Mr. Zunde walks up, interrupting the conversation between Mr. Crum and Mr. Frazier, telling Mr. Crum, "Crum, get out of my arena! Now!" Mr. Crum exclaims, "I'm not leaving! There has been a violation of the rules here." Mr. Zunde asks Mr. Crum, "and, just exactly what rule has been violated?" Confident in his accusation, Mr. Crum replies, "Kathy Karakova and Paula Giovani are not eligible to run. They're on the track!" Intending to irritate Mr. Crum, Mr. Zunde tells him, "so what. That's not a violation of any rule."

The school superintendent, Dr. Brooks, who knows her cousin, Mr. Zunde, very well, sits back on the bleachers taking a few mental notes. Dr. Brooks watches carefully as Mr. Crum proceeds to make a fool of

himself. And, of course, Mr. Zunde's carefully worded responses to Mr. Crum's outbursts do nothing but infuriate Mr. Crum even more.

The Timekeeper returns with the official event roster, and calls the coaches together for a meeting. Mr. Crum invites himself to the meeting, ready to set everyone straight. The Timekeeper asks Mr. Ruff again, "now, what exactly is the nature of your complaint?" Mr. Ruff exclaims, "the girls are not eligible to run!"

The Timekeeper asks Mr. Frazier, "what are the girl's names?" Mr. Frazier answers, "Kathy Karakova and Paula Giovani. They're my assistant coaches." The Timekeeper asks Mr. Frazier, "so, who's running in the 4 by 440 relay?" Mr. Frazier replies, "Axel Braden, Eric Johnson, Mark Svoboda, and Eddie Bogenskaya." Pointing them out, Mr. Frazier explains, "two of them are standing over there with their girlfriends, and the other two are standing over there with their girlfriends." The Timekeeper tells the other coaches, "I really fail to see any problem here."

Realizing that he made a complete fool of himself, Mr. Ruff walks over to his 4 by 440 relay team, telling them, "they were going to have the girls run, but I wouldn't let them get away with it. So, they made some last minute substitutions." Mr. Ruff's relay team believes him, but that's par for the course.

Mr. Zunde tells Mr. Crum, "Crum, you've caused enough problems today. Get out of my arena!" Mr. Crum refuses, and takes his seat on the bleachers. Dr. Brooks, the school superintendent, makes a mental note of Mr. Crum's attempt to undermine the team, and discredit the school. Mr. Frazier whispers to Mark, "that was a good one! Mr. Zunde wanted to see how far it would go." Mark replies, "it looks like they took it to the moon and back. And, they should suspend Mr. Crum for that one. Just sayin'."

For once, with the upper hand, McCutchen tells Mark, "did you guys really think you would get away with that?" Avoiding the question, Mark asks McCutchen, "didn't you listen to me last Summer?" Not knowing to what Mark is referring, McCutchen asks, "what are you talking about?" Mark, pointing to a red spot on McCutchen's leg, tells him, "it looks like you got bit by a Prickly Sea Spider. The bull's-eye appearance gives it away. It's going to cause your tendons to rot away." Looking at the back of his leg, McCutchen begins to get worried. There is a rather large red spot on McCutchen's leg, which appears to be an infected spider bite. Mark shakes his head, and tells McCutchen, "I hope it doesn't tear during the race."

Starting the race fifteen minutes late, the Starter tells everyone, "okay, let's get this race underway." Letting everyone know who's boss, Braden exclaims, "here it comes! The biggest ass kicking of the afternoon! I

hope everyone's ready!" Mark tells Eddie and Johnson, "McCrutchen's probably their anchor. I want to run last." Already receiving permission from Mr. Frazier to switch if they want, Eddie replies, "sure. But, we'll probably win the race before McCrutchen receives his baton." Johnson tells Mark, "he might have a point. Let's go for it. We might be able to win before McCrutchen gets his baton." Eddie and Mark tell Johnson that they're in on the plan.

The Starter, who is somewhat annoyed at Mr. Ruff's temper tantrum, tells everyone to get behind their blocks. Apparently, the controversy has spread to the runners, who are discussing the issue among themselves, rather than focusing on the race. Irritating Mr. Ruff further, the Starter announces, "let's get moving, or I'm going to give first, second, and third place in this race to Northside!" Braden is behind his blocks, exclaiming, "you heard what he said! Let's get this ass kicking underway!"

The Starter announces, "on your marks." Looking at the runners as they get positioned, the Starter yells out to the Centerville runner, in lane three, "son, this is a relay race! I suggest you procure a baton as fast as possible!" Eddie looks over at lane three, and tells Mark, "hey! That's McCrutchen, Jr." The crowd laughs hysterically, just seeing a runner attempting to begin a relay race without a baton in his hand. Evans, Centerville's intern, quickly delivers the baton to Jeff McCutchen, Todd McCutchen's very inexperienced younger brother.

The Starter raises his voice, and announces, "for the second time, and hopefully the last time today, on your marks!" He quickly announces, "set." Taking longer than usual to start the race, the Starter looks over the field a few times to make sure the runners are in the "set" position and all have their batons. The Starter sounds the buzzer, and the final race of the day is underway. As the runners leave the blocks, Mark looks over at McCutchen to somehow belabor the point that his brother was going to run without a baton. Instead, he catches McCutchen examining his legs for Prickly Sea Spider bites. McCutchen, now in auto self-destruct mode, is in no further need of distraction today.

Braden's enthusiasm quickly shifts from his mouth to his legs. It only takes one lap for Braden to gain a significant lead. Far behind, Riverdale, Centerville, and Madison are all running at the same pace, with no one breaking away. On the second lap, Mr. Frazier yells out, "he's clocking at a sub-50 pace!" Everyone on the team knows that Braden can easily break 50 seconds in the quarter mile. Mr. Frazier made the announcement only to annoy Mr. Ruff. Braden hands off to Johnson, and casually walks off the track, as the other runners come around the curve to the transition zone.

During the other team's handoffs, as each runner passes by, Braden kicks his foot in the direction in which the runners are running, letting

everyone know they just got their ass kicked. McCutchen, Jr. delivered a less than competitive time for Centerville, running his leg in a dismal 77 seconds.

Meanwhile, Johnson is on the back straightaway, working to gain a significant lead. Johnson really wants Mark to be finished with the final leg before McCutchen receives his baton. As Johnson completes his first lap, Mr. Frazier exclaims, "can you believe it? Another sub-50 quarter is on the way!" Braden exclaims, "this is the major league ass kicking of the day!" At the end of the second lap, Johnson is 30 seconds ahead of the second place Riverdale team. Centerville and Madison are nearly tied for last place. Johnson hands off to Eddie, whose job is to also deliver a sub-50 second quarter mile.

Eddie, now more than one lap ahead of Centerville, begins to widen the lead. Long after Eddie completes his first lap, the Centerville runner receives his baton. Riverdale is doing a little better, also gaining ground over Centerville and Madison. As for Madison, they might stand a chance to beat Centerville this year if their anchorman can beat McCutchen. Mark gets on the track, staring at McCutchen, who will be on the sidelines for a while. As Eddie comes around the final curve on his last lap, Mark is ready to deliver the performance of the afternoon. Eddie hands off to Mark, who has his eyes on lapping the Centerville runner. Mr. Frazier exclaims, "that was a 47-second quarter mile! Did everyone see that?"

Mark takes off like a wild man, increasing the lead over Centerville. With all eyes focused on Mark, not many have noticed that the Madison runner has just taken a clear lead over the Centerville runner. Now in last place, Centerville's coach, Mr. Ruff, is yelling and screaming in an attempt to get his runner to run faster. When Mark completes his first lap, the Centerville runner, on the final lap of the third leg, has just entered the first curve. Mark sprints like he is running the 40-yard dash, attempting to catch the Centerville runner. On the back straightaway, Mark gains significant ground. Around the final turn, Mark gains a little more ground. Out of the final turn, Mark sprints to the finish, passing the Centerville runner two seconds before McCutchen, Centerville's anchorman, receives his baton.

Mark walks off the track and back to the finish line. Mr. Frazier and the rest of the 4 by 440 relay team celebrate their victory, giving each other high-fives. Mark, however, is standing to the inside of the track, waiting patiently as McCutchen completes his first lap. McCutchen and his coach, Mr. Ruff, know exactly what just happened. Centerville just got their head handed to them. If this is any indication of what will happen for the rest of the season, Centerville will have a lot of work to do. But, Mr. Ruff does not quite see it that way.

Before the race is even over, Mr. Ruff walks over to the Riverdale coach, Mr. Lyons. Mr. Ruff tells Mr. Lyons, “last Spring, at the State meet, I was having a conversation with Rudy Parker, the Henderson coach. We got a good close-up look at these guys. It’s pretty clear that they’re all taking steroids.” Mr. Lyons replies, “I’m not stupid. I saw what just happened. You’re probably right.” Mr. Ruff comments, “they’re even bigger and faster this year.”

Mr. Ruff probably should have kept his mouth shut. Mark, the master of psychological warfare, just heard all of what was said between Mr. Ruff and Mr. Lyons. Mr. Ruff watches, as McCutchen, in last place, crosses the finish line with a dismal time. Worst of all, Centerville was just beaten by Madison.

Mark passes by McCutchen, who says nothing to Mark, but nothing had to be said. McCutchen knows that he and his team just got their ass kicked. Mark, however, cannot remain silent. Passing by McCutchen, Mark whispers to him, “steroids. That’s where it’s at, man. Steroids.” Mark walks away, planting the seed that will likely grow to be a jungle of controversy by the end of the season. McCutchen is sure to tell his coach what he heard.

Mark exchanges high-fives with his relay team members, as they head back to the team bench together. With the awards ceremony just a few minutes away, the team has an early celebration. Mark tells Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde what he heard of the verbal exchange between Mr. Ruff and Mr. Lyons regarding the team taking steroids. Mr. Zunde, recalling his run in with Mr. Ruff at last year’s Spring State invitational meet, is not surprised at all that Mr. Ruff has again raised this issue.

The Meet Announcer tells everyone that the awards ceremony will be in five minutes. Since the arena is full with spectators today, the Announcer instructs the runners to assemble at their designated team area. Mr. Frazier informs the team that they have won the gold medal in every event. The team, however, already knows this. What they don’t know is that the team took all the silver medals in the individual track events as well.

Standing behind the podium, the Meet Announcer addresses the runners, saying, “when your name is called, I want you to walk up to the appropriate tier for your award. Once the awards are distributed, you will then stand behind your coach.” The group of athletes standing behind their coach is the coach’s reward for the meet. To each of the left and right of the podium stand two coaches, spread out in the center of the oval track where the field events are held. Kathy, Paula, Barbara, and Wendy stand with Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde to the far left side of the oval.

In the 40-yard dash, Eddie takes the gold medal, Hoffer the silver, and John takes the bronze. In the 220-yard dash, Mark takes the gold medal, Elliot takes the silver, and Hill takes the bronze. It's no secret that Hill, a freshman, will be one of the team's stars soon.

Braden takes the gold medal in the 440-yard dash, Erika takes the silver, and Tessa the bronze. It seems that there are not a lot of athletes on the competing teams who are strong in the 440-yard dash. The poor performance of Centerville, Riverdale, and Madison in the 4 by 440 relay event attests to that fact.

In both the mile and the 880-yard run, Mitchell takes the gold medal, Johnson takes the silver, and Akinmola takes the bronze.

In the relay events, Northside takes the gold medal in every event. Even the mile medley relay team, comprised of all freshmen this year, takes the gold medal. Riverdale, as usual, takes the bulk of the silver medals in the relay events. As the awards continue, Mr. Frazier's group is getting to be, by far, the largest.

In the field events, Bobby B. takes the gold medal in the shot-put. Never throwing the shot-put in competition before, Eddie takes the silver medal. Mark, who has thrown the shot-put a few times in middle school competition, takes the bronze. Never competing in the high jump, Akinmola takes the gold medal in that event today. Unfortunately, the silver and bronze medals in the high jump went to the other teams. Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde will have to find a solution to that problem for future meets.

After the ceremony, Eddie and Mark walk over to meet their parents along with Kathy and Paula. Kathy and Eddie have not seen each other much during this meet. Neither have Mark and Paula. Kathy and Paula have to work again during the meets, so the couples don't have as many opportunities to hang out between events. Another celebration breaks out, with the winners showing off their medals to everyone around. Having her eyes set on pizza, Kathy suggests that everyone go out to the Italian restaurant for a late lunch.

Mr. Harris comes down from the bleachers to meet the athletes he coached years ago. Quite impressed by their performance, Mr. Harris mentions, "you guys have definitely come a long way! When you left in eighth grade, I knew you were good. I had no idea you were this good!" Braden tells Mr. Harris, "we've been kicking ass for years! We've been going to State since our freshman year!" Mr. Harris tells Braden, "when you were in eighth grade, I remember you being unstoppable."

Mr. Harris asks Mark, “are you still messing with heads?” Mark replies, “yeah. Did you see that mess before the 4 by 440 relay began? That was my fault.” Curiously, Mr. Harris asks, “what was up with that?” Mark explains the situation, telling Mr. Harris, “me, Eddie, Paula, and Kathy went to State in the last two years in the 4 by 440 relay. We won the gold medal in the last two indoor and Spring seasons.” Mark tells Mr. Harris, “when we stood together, they thought we were going to run the relay race together, but Kathy and Paula have graduated.” Mr. Harris mentions, “Kathy and Paula. I knew they looked vaguely familiar. They used to come to all the meets when they were in middle school.” Mark tells Mr. Harris, “so, McCrutchen’s coach, Mr. Ruff, blew a gasket.”

Mark and Eddie introduce Kathy and Paula to Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris immediately recognizes Kathy as the student who accompanies Mr. Frazier on his yearly visit to the last middle school home meet of the year. Mr. Harris mentions, “I heard about some controversy about whether girls were allowed to run track.” Kathy tells Mr. Harris, “yeah, big time! But, we got to run track for two years. Those were the best times!” Paula comments, “yeah, that was the biggest mess you can imagine.”

Mr. Harris asks, “so, you’ve both graduated?” Kathy replies, “yeah. We both got track scholarships and run for the University now. We also got internships, and help out with the team.” Learning what happens with the students after they graduate, Mr. Harris replies, “wow! That is really awesome!”

Mr. Frazier walks over to join the conversation. Mr. Harris tells Mr. Frazier, “so, this is what you do with all the talent I send you every year.” Mr. Frazier replies, “yeah! They’re really good. Thank you! What do you got coming up for me this year?” With some good news, Mr. Harris replies, “we have a few good sprinters and a good distance guy in the eighth grade.” With the high jump being the team’s weakest event this year, Mr. Frazier jokingly replies, “that sounds great! Send me a good high jumper if you can.” Quite puzzled, Mr. Harris asks, “didn’t Joe Sepulveda try out for the team?” Recognizing the name, Mr. Frazier replies, “I know the name from gym class. But, no. He didn’t try out for the team.” Mr. Harris mentions, “that’s surprising. You should look into it. Last year, he didn’t lose a single meet.” Mr. Frazier now has someone to hunt down next week.

Sometime during the conversation between Mr. Frazier and Mr. Harris, Kathy and Paula have arranged for the whole team to get pizza. Not wanting to leave anyone out, Kathy tells Mr. Frazier and Mr. Harris, “the whole team is getting pizza. Mr. Zunde is coming. And, you guys are coming too, right?” Looking at Mr. Frazier, Mr. Harris replies, “sure, I’ll come.” Mr. Frazier tells Kathy, “count me in.” Kathy didn’t leave them much choice, but they are both glad to go with the team to get pizza.

On the way out of the arena, Mr. Ruff tells Mr. Crum, “congratulations on your awesome victory! If we all took steroids, maybe we’d win as many medals as your school.” Mr. Crum chuckles, and asks, “what’s this about steroids?” Mr. Ruff tells Mr. Crum, “just look at your team! No one is naturally that big and fast. And, they’ve even admitted it!” Mr. Crum, looking around to see who is watching him, informs Mr. Ruff, “I’ll look into it.” Acting quite disgusted, Mr. Ruff replies, “yeah, as if that’s going to do any good. Steroids really tilts the odds in your favor. And, if I remember correctly, you weren’t supposed to take everything!”

Anyone watching the exchange between Mr. Crum and Mr. Ruff clearly gets the impression that there is more to the conversation than meets the eye. Mr. Crum now suspects that Mr. Frazier, and the track team, is up to something illegal. Mr. Crum will probably be searching the school policy manual come Monday morning for some sort of rule to enforce.

Everyone meets at the pizzeria at around 2:00 p.m. Fortunately, for Joe, this is the slow time of the day. The lunch crowd is on their way out, and the dinner crowd has a few hours before they begin to arrive. Eddie and Kathy arrive first, and walk in. Joe yells out from behind the counter, “hey, did you guys win?” Kathy replies, “yeah. We won everything!” Joe asks, “where’s Mark and Paula?” Eddie replies, “they’re coming, with the whole team and our coaches.” Joe tells Eddie and Kathy, “the dining room is all cleared out. You guys can sit there.” Knowing the track team, Joe asks, “should I start making some pizzas?” Kathy tells him, “yeah. Probably a few dozen.” Joe gets moving, tossing some pizza dough, preparing for the crowd.

The team piles in, along with their coaches and some of the parents. Everyone on the team has at least one medal around their neck today. The waitress, Arianna, volunteers to stay over since there is a crowd. Joe is glad to have her stay, and so is Arianna. Arianna really enjoys serving the track team because they are so happy and full of energy. They all have a seat in the formal dining room, still celebrating their victory earlier today. Arianna takes everyone’s order, which can be summed up as pizza for everyone.

Joe finally gets to meet Mr. Frazier. Mr. Frazier tells Joe, “my team tells me that pizza makes them run faster.” Joe tells Mr. Frazier, “I don’t know about that. But, when they’re all here together, they really have a lot of good energy, especially when they bring their girls. Just look at them!” Mr. Frazier looks around the dining room, never remembering seeing the team this happy before. Perhaps Mr. Frazier will let them get a little more pizza this season. He figures pizza should be okay, just as long as it’s not consumed immediately before the 440-yard dash.

While they are all enjoying their victory lunch, a familiar face walks in. Kathy, who can see the pizza counter from her seat, tells Paula, “déjà vu. It’s back.” Paula turns around, and sees none other than Paul Mahoney. Kathy mentions to Paula, “they must have let him out of the sanitarium.” Paula reminds Kathy, “we saw him here last Spring. He actually acted normal.” Kathy replies, “yeah, that’s right! He even apologized.” Mahoney orders two slices of pizza and a drink, and takes a seat on the informal side of the restaurant. As the track team celebrates, Mahoney sits in his seat alone, occasionally peering into the dining room, taking in all that is going on.

During lunch, Kathy gets everyone’s attention by hitting her spoon on her glass. Kathy tells everyone, “hey, everybody! I have an announcement to make.” Everyone, including Mr. Frazier, is at a loss about what Kathy is talking about. The room goes silent, and Kathy tells Arianna, “hey, go and get Joe!” Everyone now has to wait a minute for Joe, who is working the counter. Mark asks Paula, “what’s this about?” Paula replies, “I have no idea. But you know Kathy. Like Eddie always says, she’s always full of surprises.”

Joe walks into the dining room. The room goes quiet again, and Kathy announces, “okay, now for my announcement.” Wasting no time, and getting right to the point, Kathy announces, “Eddie and I are getting married!”

Upon hearing the good news, everyone in the room cheers. Mark and Paula are surprised, but not surprised. Paula tells Mark, “wow! I was half expecting this someday, but not this fast!” Mr. Frazier, however, is quite surprised. He knows Eddie and Kathy have been dating, but did not realize their relationship was this serious. Bobby B. yells out, “you may now kiss the bride!” The tribe starts hitting their spoons on their glasses. Kathy and Eddie kiss each other. The official announcement has now been made. Sometime after Eddie graduates, the couple will get married.

After lunch, everyone gets ready to head out. Mr. Frazier had no idea that the team spirit goes far beyond the track. Before everyone leaves, Mr. Frazier announces, “may I have your attention for a moment.” The crowd quiets down, and Mr. Frazier tells everyone, “I just want to thank you for asking Mr. Harris, Mr. Zunde, and myself to join you today. This has been the best regular season meet I can ever remember, and the first time everyone on the team has walked away with a medal.”

Turning his attention to Kathy and Eddie, Mr. Frazier tells them, “and, we are all honored that you both chose this occasion to announce your plans and invited us to be present.” The crowd cheers again, and Mr. Frazier tells everyone, “I hope you all have a great weekend, and we’ll see you on Monday.” The crowd claps and cheers, showing their appreciation

for their coaches. One by one, everyone heads out. Eddie and Kathy head back to the school to get Kathy's car, then head to Kathy's house.

When they walk inside Kathy's house, Kathy's father asks, "so, how did the meet go?" Kathy tells him, "we won everything." Thinking Kathy is exaggerating a bit, Kathy's father asks, "everything?" Kathy replies, "yeah. We got all the gold medals and all the silver medals, and most of the bronze ones too. Well, except for the relay races. We got all the gold medals in the relays, but we can only have one entry. Oh, and except for the high jump. Some other team got the silver and bronze. And, Mr. Ruff is really ticked off." Kathy's father replies, "thanks for the fair warning. I can't wait to hear what he complains about this year."

Kathy continues, telling her dad, "and, you should have seen Braden. After he finished his leg in the relay, he was kicking his foot in the air like he was kicking someone's ass as the other runners handed off their batons." Kathy's father tells her, "it sounds like you had a lot of fun." Kathy replies, "yeah, but what Braden did is only the beginning. Me, Eddie, Paula, and Mark were standing together before the 4 by 440 relay because Mark told us to. And, so Mark told Braden and Johnson to stand way aside with Wendy and Barbara. And, Mr. Ruff thought me and Paula were going to run in the race, so he blew a head gasket. And, Mr. Crum got involved, and Mr. Zunde told him to leave, but he wouldn't." Kathy's mother tells Kathy, "it sounds like you have a lot of energy." Kathy tells her mother, "yeah, sort of."

Taking a deep breath, Kathy asks, "and, so why does Mr. Zunde always call it 'my arena'? It's not like he owns it." Kathy's father tells her, "it sort of is his arena. He had it installed." Kathy exclaims, "what?" Eddie asks, "really?" Kathy's father explains, "Mr. Zunde works as a consultant in conjunction with the company who made the track. It's an experimental track, and the company comes out every month to check it. They've replaced the running surface once. So, technically, in a way, it is Mr. Zunde's arena." Eddie asks, "when did he put it in?" Kathy's father tells Eddie, "he had the track put in after the school board appointed him athletic director. The school board assigned the space to him, and Mr. Zunde had the track installed." In awe, Kathy exclaims, "wow! I never knew that!"

Recalling a few of the run-ins between Mr. Crum and Mr. Zunde over the last few years, Kathy mentions, "no wonder Mr. Zunde always kicks Mr. Crum out. He always says, 'Crum, get out of my arena!' And, it's so funny when he says that!" Kathy's father tells her, "if I am not mistaken, the only part of that arena the school owns is the four locker rooms. The track, the bleachers, and team areas belong to the company, and it's all in Mr. Zunde's jurisdiction." Practicing for what she may have to say one day, Kathy says, "Crum, get out of Mr. Zunde's arena! Hmm. Crum, get

out of my arena!” Everyone laughs, knowing for sure that Kathy will surely use that line someday.

Kathy and Eddie head out for the afternoon. Now that it’s Winter, Kathy wants to drive through the town behind the high school with Eddie. Kathy plans to show Eddie how beautiful the area is during the Winter. Still looking for the perfect house, Kathy drives these roads to the University every day. There are many ways to get to the University through the town, and Kathy is getting to know them well. But today, she wants to take a drive with Eddie to see if they can find something that might be for sale, or stop in the park for a while.

Eddie and Kathy drive down the road toward the high school. They head to the rarely visited small park in the town behind the high school, which has only a few parking places. This has been Kathy’s new long way home since she got her car. Eddie drives into the parking lot, they get out of the car, and head to the sole bench in the park.

Kathy tells Eddie, “when we buy a house here, we won’t need to take the long way home anymore.” Eddie tells Kathy, “if we get a house here, I’ll build a park in the back yard.” Kathy asks, “how do you mean, ‘if we get a house?’” Eddie tells Kathy, “there’s not much for sale around here.” Kathy tells Eddie, “but, there will be. You’ll see.”

Kathy sits on Eddie’s lap, asking him, “Edward Bogenskaya, will you marry me?” Eddie replies, “Katarina Karakova, I will marry you.” Kathy and Eddie embrace, holding each other tightly in their arms. Kathy and Eddie get lost in their own world, showing their passion and expressing their love for each other.

After a while, the sun begins to set. Eddie and Kathy have totally lost track of time. Once Kathy realizes that it is getting dark, she tells Eddie, “the long way home. Wow! This was the long, long way.” Holding Eddie, Kathy tells him, “I love you so much.” Eddie tells Kathy, “I love you, sweetie.” They don’t exchange a lot of words, but not much needs to be said.

They walk back to Eddie’s car. Eddie tells Kathy, “well, I guess we’re not looking for houses today.” Kathy replies, “why not?” Eddie replies, “it’s dark out. You can’t see any of the houses from the road.” Kathy sighs, telling Eddie, “that’s why I like this area so much.” Kathy asks Eddie, “let’s look anyway, just to see. Please?” They drive out of the park, meandering around the curvy roads of the town. Eddie mentions, “it seems like we’re the only ones on the road.” Kathy tells Eddie, “see? That’s why it’s so nice out here.”

Eddie points out, “hey! There’s a house for sale,” as he drives past a house on a corner with a sign saying that it is for sale. Kathy screams out, “go back! I missed it.” Eddie finds a place to turn around. Arriving at the house, Eddie pulls the car off the road. Kathy and Eddie get out of the car, and walk around. Since it is dark out, they can’t see a whole lot. They walk up the road, and find the driveway. Being a little adventurous, they walk up the driveway, and see the house. Walking a little farther, Kathy whispers to Eddie, “hey, look. A pool!” Eddie whispers back, “we have to come back and look at this place sometime.” Kathy replies, “yeah! Like tomorrow!” As they walk back down the driveway, Eddie suggests, “let’s get the phone number off the sign.”

They get back to the car, and Eddie gets his school notebook and a pen out of the trunk. Walking up to the sign, they find a smaller sign on top, advertising that there is an open house tomorrow. Eddie asks, “what’s an open house?” Kathy tells him, “I think it’s when you can just come and look.” Eddie suggests, “we can drive by tomorrow and see.” They now have a plan. Tomorrow they will drive by and get a better look.

On the drive home, Eddie jokingly asks, “hey. Do you want to drive by Second Street and see if anything is for sale there?” Kathy, who hates Second Street because she thinks it is haunted, replies, “no! Just the thought of living anywhere near Second Street is enough to make me buy more gold and sell it through the portal!” Thinking a little further, and changing the subject, Kathy tells Eddie, “and hey, you’ll be eighteen in a few days. If we like it, we can buy the house together!” Eddie replies, “yeah, next Saturday!” Kathy tells Eddie, “that would be a really nice birthday present!”

The next afternoon, Eddie and Kathy drive to the house they saw the previous night. Driving up the long driveway, they find a place to park near a separate detached garage. Looking around the outside, Eddie mentions, “wow! It’s all brick.” Kathy asks, “is that good?” Eddie replies, “yeah. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life painting siding.” Before they go inside, Kathy takes a look at the pool, which is about 20 feet by 40 feet. Looking around, Kathy exclaims, “wow, Eddie! Look! You can’t see any other houses from here! It’s all woods!” It doesn’t take Kathy too long to fall in love with the serene setting of the house.

They walk up to the door and knock. The real estate agent, whose name is Traci, opens the door, inviting them in. After greeting Kathy and Eddie, Traci shows them around the inside of the house. Catching Kathy’s eyes are the living room windows, which have no window treatments on them at all. With a view to the woods, no one could see into the windows even if they wanted to. Kathy whispers to Eddie, “you could walk around this house stark naked, and no one would see you.”

After seeing all the rooms, Eddie asks Kathy, “do you like it?” Kathy replies, “what’s not to like? It’s awesome!” With three bedrooms, two and a half baths, a living room, dining room, kitchen, breakfast area, an office, and a separate laundry area, there is more than enough space for Kathy and Eddie. Best of all, the rooms are quite large compared with what Eddie and Kathy are used to.

Traci, the real estate agent, tells them that there is a full unfinished basement and a separate detached two-car garage in addition to the attached two-car garage. Eddie and Kathy go downstairs to take a look. The downstairs is divided into several large unfinished rooms. Eddie pays particular attention to the construction, which meets his strict standards. Eddie mentions to Kathy, “you can do anything you want with this space.” Kathy replies, “it looks like a gym to me.”

The real estate agent then escorts Kathy and Eddie back upstairs, and outside to the pool area. Kathy looks around the pool, which she really likes. Eddie notices that, unlike Kathy’s pool, this pool has a heater. Noticing that the pool area is tiled, Kathy asks Eddie, “what kind of tile is this?” Eddie tells her, “it’s Travertine. It’s a lot better than concrete.” Even though it’s Winter, Kathy inspects the water and surrounding area for frogs. Fortunately, she finds no frogs today, dead or alive. Looking around at the woods, Kathy asks Traci, “how much land goes with the house?” Traci replies, “three acres, which is about normal for this area.”

As they go back inside, Kathy asks Eddie, “can we get it? Please, please, please?” The real estate agent, seeing how young her clients are, asks, “do you two guys have jobs?” Bending the truth a bit, Kathy replies, “Eddie’s got something on the way, but I have a job.” After all, Kathy is a paid intern. The real estate agent informs them, “you’ll have to apply for a mortgage. Without a job, the bank is not likely going to give you a loan.” Kathy informs the real estate agent, “that’s okay. We’ll be paying cash for it.” All of a sudden, the agent’s eyes get wide open. Not expecting to hear that from a seventeen and eighteen-year-old, the agent is at a loss for words.

Learning psychological warfare techniques from Mark, Eddie pulls Kathy aside for a private conversation. Eddie winks at Kathy and whispers just loud enough for the agent to hear, “she obviously doesn’t recognize you.” Kathy, knowing Eddie well, whispers back, “good. I’m really tired of signing autographs.” Eddie then whispers to Kathy, “we should get Mark to take a look at the construction. Then we’ll decide.”

Eddie and Kathy walk back to the agent, who overheard the private conversation that was clearly intended for her to hear. Eddie asks, “hey. Can I have my construction guy come take a look at it?” The agent, now realizing Kathy and Eddie are serious buyers, replies, “sure. I’ll be here

until five today. If that doesn't work, we can always set up an appointment with him to inspect it." Kathy tells the agent, "we'll be back in about an hour." Kathy and Eddie thank the agent, and leave to hunt down Mark.

Eddie finds Mark, who is doing little more than rearranging the tools in his truck, as he is waiting for Paula. Eddie and Kathy explain to Mark that they've found a house, and they want him to take a look at it. Mark asks, "how did you guys get the money to buy a house?" Kathy tells Mark, "the same way Paula got you money to buy your truck." Mark thinks about what Kathy said for a moment, and replies, "yeah! Now I get it."

Paula drives up, and is surprised to find out that Eddie and Kathy are thinking of buying a house. And, of course, Paula wants to see it too. Kathy tells Mark and Paula, "before we go, there's something that you guys need to know." Paula asks, "uh oh. What's that?" Kathy explains, "the real estate agent didn't think we can afford the house, so Eddie whispered to me, 'she obviously doesn't recognize you.' And I whispered back, 'good. I'm really tired of signing autographs.' But, we whispered so that she can hear us. So, now she thinks I'm someone famous." Mark compliments Kathy, telling her, "that's a good one! We'll play along. This should be fun!" They all then head to the house. Eddie drives Kathy in his MGB. Mark finally gets to drive his construction vehicle in an official capacity, something he has been waiting for.

They arrive back at the house. Walking around the outside, the pool catches Paula's eye. Wandering over to the pool area, Mark mentions, "wow! The pool is big enough to swim laps." Eddie mentions, "and, it's heated. We can swim laps all year round." Kathy mentions, "you can swim laps in January. I'm not swimming laps in this weather." After admiring the pool, they all go inside.

Traci, the agent, shows Kathy and Paula the living space, whereas Eddie and Mark go downstairs to examine the bones of the house.

Mark quickly points out to Eddie, "the floor joists are twelve inches on center, and they're two by twelves. I wonder why they did that." Two by tens, sixteen inches on center, would be standard construction practice for this size house. Mark also points out that there are no cracks in the foundation wall, no plumbing leaks, and no evidence of termites. Mark finds no problems in the basement.

Moving on, Eddie and Mark walk around the outside of the house, where Mark notices that there are no cracks in the brickwork. Mark points out, "good. It has metal windows. Metal doesn't rot." Mark, pointing to a large pine tree too close to the house, mentions, "the only thing that I see out here is that pine tree needs to come down." Eddie

replies, “yeah. I can see that.” Mark adds, “that should be easy enough to do.”

Inside, Mark notices that all the doors are still true, and there are no apparent water leaks. In summary, Mark tells Eddie, “well, there’s not anything obviously wrong.” That is all good news to Eddie, for he would hate to see Kathy get upset if there was something seriously wrong with the house. After inspecting the house for more than an hour, Mark gives the structure his seal of approval.

Eddie and Mark join Kathy and Paula, who are looking around inside. Eddie asks Kathy, “can I show you something?” Kathy replies, “sure.” Eddie tells the agent, “we’ll be right back. We’re going to look at something outside.” Eddie and Kathy walk outside, leaving Mark and Paula inside with the agent.

Outside, Kathy asks Eddie, “what’s up? Is there something wrong?” Eddie replies, “no. Mark says it checks out. I just wanted to hear what you thought.” Putting her arms around Eddie’s neck, Kathy asks him, “I really like this place. Can we get it? Please?” Eddie replies, “sure. We have enough money, right?” Kathy replies, “yeah. For five or six of them.” Also liking the house, Eddie replies, “then, let’s get it.”

Meanwhile, back inside, the real estate agent asks Paula, “okay, so please tell me. Am I supposed to know those two?” Mark, quickly catching on to what Kathy explained earlier, replies, “you would if you watch sports competitions. But, I can’t say too much more than that.” Remembering how the crowd went wild when Kathy threw the discus, being quite vague, Paula adds, “yeah, Kathy doesn’t like all the publicity. Whenever she enters the field, the crowd goes wild. That’s why they’re wanting to move here. They can hide from the public.” How Paula manages to say things like that with a straight face is anybody’s guess. The agent, having her questions answered, albeit indirectly, replies, “oh, I see. I won’t pry then.” Paula tells the agent, “I’m sure Kathy will really appreciate that.”

Kathy and Eddie walk back inside. Kathy tells the agent, “okay, we’ll take it. Now what?” The agent tells Kathy, “I’ll have to draw up the contract, and we’ll get the ball rolling.” Kathy tells the agent, “Eddie won’t be eighteen until next weekend. Will that be a problem?” The agent assures her, “no. I’ll just put in a special clause that states Eddie will officially sign the paperwork next week.”

The agent tells Kathy, “you do know that the owner will probably need a month or six weeks before they can move out, don’t you?” Kathy replies, “no problem. You got it.” The agent fills in the contract, and Kathy signs it. Kathy writes the earnest money check, and Kathy and

Eddie are now on their way to having their house in the woods. Well, almost. The agent tells Kathy, “the owner will have to accept the contract, but I don’t see any reason why they won’t.” Paula whispers to Mark, “wow! That was easy.” Mark replies, “yeah, I’d say.”

Before they leave, Kathy and Eddie take another look around the inside of the house with Mark and Paula. Paula mentions to Kathy, “you can use the office to do your school work.” Kathy replies, “yeah, unless it’s nice out. Then, I’ll be doing my school work out by the pool.”

Before they get in their cars, they all decide to take one more look at the pool area. Walking around the pool area one more time, giving Eddie a high-five, Kathy exclaims, “awesome! We’re not moving to Second Street!” Paula gives Mark an interesting look, having no idea what Kathy’s reference to Second Street is all about.

Outside, Kathy points out an area by the pool, and tells Eddie, “I want to buy a patio table, and put it here. This can be where I do my school work when it’s nice out.” Seeing the beautiful view, Paula comments, “yeah, I can see that. I’d really love to join you. This definitely beats the library.” With the house about a mile from the University, Kathy can see how convenient it will be. Eddie and Kathy thank Mark for inspecting the house. They all head out, with Kathy having a little something more to explain to her parents.

The following week, Kathy and Eddie meet Traci, the real estate agent, at the house. On his birthday, Eddie signs the contract for the house. They decide on a closing date, which is right after the indoor track invitational meet. This will allow the seller enough time to get everything packed and move. This will also give Traci more time to figure out exactly who Kathy is, and why she is famous, as Paula and Mark hinted.

Back at school, Chuckie is not too happy with Lynn Berson. Lynn got a few good photographs of Chuckie being carried over Bobby B’s. shoulder to the principal’s office when Chuckie and Goldstein caused an uprising in physics class earlier this school year. One photograph appeared on the front page of the school newspaper, making Chuckie the laughingstock of the school. Mark, however, would argue that Chuckie has always been the laughingstock of the school. What Chuckie does not know is that a few other photographs of him being carried to Mr. Crum’s office will appear in the yearbook.

Between first and second period, Chuckie walks down the hallway behind Lynn during class change. Lynn has her books in one hand and, as expected, her camera hanging from her camera strap in her other hand. Seeing an opportunity to get back at Lynn for the humiliation she caused, Chuckie strategically places his foot through Lynn’s camera strap

and briskly thrusts Lynn's camera to the floor. Lynn abruptly stops and picks up her camera, immediately seeing that the lens has been broken. Chuckie laughs, and tells Lynn, "I'm sorry. You should have been walking faster."

Lynn lashes out at Chuckie, "you idiot!" Chuckie replies, "you're the idiot, bitch! It was an accident." Lynn carefully examines her camera, seeing that Chuckie has not only broken the lens, but has also damaged the camera body as well. Now extremely upset, Lynn exclaims, "you broke my lens and my camera!" Chuckie tries to grab Lynn's camera, but Lynn pushes him away. Making a second attempt, and grabbing Lynn's camera, Chuckie tells Lynn, "I didn't break it! Let me see it." Lynn pulls her camera away from Chuckie, who now grabs Lynn and slams her up against the wall. Lynn screams, catching the attention of everyone in the hallway, including the attention of Axel Braden.

Walking up to Chuckie, Braden announces, "you shouldn't have done that." Braden forcefully grabs Chuckie and, bracing his foot against the wall, Braden shoves Chuckie across the hallway with as much force as he can deliver. Chuckie is abruptly greeted by a concrete block wall, and suddenly falls to the ground. Chuckie, now motionless, has been knocked out cold. On their way to class, the students just walk around Chuckie.

Meanwhile, Eddie asks Lynn, "are you okay?" Crying her heart out, Lynn replies, "I'll be okay. But, he broke my lens. And, my camera isn't looking too good either!" Lynn's camera, a Nikon F with a 50-millimeter Nikkor lens, is quite expensive. Lynn is just happy that her high-end zoom lens, which she uses for sporting events, wasn't attached to the camera. Eddie tells Lynn, "we'll take up a collection, and get you a new camera and lens." Mark comments, "or, make the Chuckie pay for it." Eddie makes a note of Lynn's camera and lens model.

Seeing that no good can come from standing in the hallway, Braden announces, "we'd better get to class, or we're gonna be late." Everyone agrees, and heads off to class, leaving Chuckie lying in the hallway. Braden fully understands that hanging around in the hallway is of no value. And, besides, someone will report to the administration that Chuckie, lying in the hallway, has a slight problem.

By the third period, the announcement is made over the loudspeaker, "will Axel Braden, Edward Bogenskaya, Mark Svoboda, and Lynn Berson please report to the principal's office immediately." Over in the gym, Mr. Zunde tells Mr. Frazier, "I wonder what this is all about." Mr. Frazier replies, "I have no idea. Things have been relatively quiet all week." Mr. Zunde tells Mr. Frazier, "I'm going to go and see what's going on." Mr. Frazier replies, "let me know if you find anything out." Mr. Zunde walks over to Mr. Crum's office, wondering what kind of trouble the guys are in

today. Braden, however, knows exactly what the meeting with the principal is about.

Mr. Zunde arrives at the administrative offices, seeing Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Lynn seated, waiting to see Mr. Crum. Mr. Zunde asks Mrs. Marlowe, the secretary, "do you know what the issue is today with these guys and Lynn?" Mrs. Marlowe replies, "it's about the fight in the hallway earlier today." Mr. Zunde replies, "oh, really? What exactly happened?" Mrs. Marlowe replies, "I'm not sure. But, it involves Charles Black, who has been sent home for the day." Mr. Zunde, hearing that Chuckie is involved, now knows he is in for some interesting entertainment.

Mr. Zunde turns to Eddie, and asks "what exactly happened this morning?" Eddie replies, "the Chuckie broke Lynn's camera, and then started a fight with her. Braden broke up the fight." Mr. Zunde asks Eddie, "how were you involved?" Eddie replies, "I wasn't. I don't even know why I'm here." Mr. Zunde asks Mark, "and, how were you involved?" Mark replies, "I wasn't involved either. But, I saw the whole thing." Mr. Zunde asks, Lynn, "what happened to your camera?" Lynn explains, "Chuckie broke my lens, and the camera body is all dented."

Expecting to hear the worst, Mr. Zunde asks Braden, "and, you broke up the fight?" Braden replies, "yeah. Chuckie shoved Lynn against the wall. So, I pulled Chuckie off of her, and pushed his ass away. His flimsy ass got knocked out somehow when he hit the wall. But, that wasn't my fault. He should have watched where he was going." Mark comments, "the Chuckie ran right into that wall. We all saw it." Mr. Zunde, without a doubt, knows this will be an interesting meeting with Mr. Crum.

Mr. Crum opens his door, telling the group of students, "get in here, all of you." Eddie walks in first, walking very slowly only to annoy Mr. Crum. Seeing only three guest chairs, Eddie decides to stand, taking a place next to Mr. Zunde, who stands next to Mr. Crum's broken bookcase.

Mr. Crum asks Mr. Zunde, "this has nothing to do with athletics. So, just why are you here?" Mr. Zunde replies, "for the same reason I'm always here. There are three athletes seated in your office, so I've come to observe and watch the entertainment." Mr. Crum informs Mr. Zunde, "fine. Just keep out of the discussion. I'm running this meeting." Always having the last word with Mr. Crum, Mr. Zunde replies, "go ahead. Don't let me stop you."

Braden kindly informs Mr. Crum, "your desk still ain't looking too good. You ought to look into getting a new one. And, your bookcase ain't looking too good either." Eddie and Mark laugh, knowing that it has been two years, and Mr. Crum's desk has not yet been replaced. Mr. Crum

tries to ignore Braden's comment, but Braden's remark set the overall tone for today's meeting.

Mr. Crum opens the meeting, informing everyone, "a very serious incident occurred in this school this morning. Charles Black is reported to have been beaten up by Axel Braden and, perhaps, a few others. Charles was knocked unconscious, and eventually made his way to the nurse's office." Mark interrupts, and asks, "if he was unconscious, how did he make his way to the nurses office?" Mr. Crum exclaims, "he eventually woke up! Then, he walked to the nurse's office! And, please don't interrupt me again!" Eddie laughs, clearly noticed by Mr. Crum.

Mr. Crum continues, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. Now, who wants to tell me what happened?" With no hesitation at all, Lynn replies, "I will." Mr. Crum coldly tells Lynn, "go ahead. I'm waiting." Lynn explains, "Chuckie slammed my camera to the ground with his foot, and broke my lens and my camera. Then, he tried to take my camera from me. And, when I wouldn't let him see it, he slammed me up against the wall. Then, Axel pulled Chuckie off of me, and pushed him away." Mr. Crum asks Lynn, "so, you started a fight?" Lynn exclaims, "no! Chuckie started the fight!" Mr. Crum informs Lynn, "nevertheless, you were involved in a fight. Fighting is not allowed in school." Mr. Zunde can't wait to see where this is going.

Mr. Crum addresses Braden, telling him, "explain to me why you decided to get involved in the fight." Braden explains, "Chuckie's fat ass is three times the size of Lynn. When Chuckie slammed Lynn against the wall, I pulled him off of her, and pushed him away. All I did is break up the fight. She don't stand a chance against his fat ass."

Mr. Crum asks Braden, "would you care to explain to me how Charles got knocked out?" Braden replies, "sure. When I pushed him away, he ran away. He must have got scared. But, the wall got in his way. It looked like to me that he should have watched where he was going. His ass ran right into that wall." Mr. Crum, suspecting that Braden had more of an involvement in the altercation, informs Braden, "as you know, Axel, fighting is not allowed in school." Braden informs Mr. Crum, "running in the hallway isn't allowed in school either. Chuckie shouldn't have run into that wall. You ought to suspend his ass."

Mr. Crum sternly informs Braden, "I'm running this meeting, not you!" Knowing that Mr. Zunde has his back, Braden replies, "just don't run your ass into a concrete wall, like Chuckie did. Your ass might get knocked out too."

Mr. Crum, trying not to show his anger, asks Braden, "do you really expect me to believe that Charles ran into the wall and got knocked out?"

Eddie interjects, “we all saw it. The Chuckie looked scared when he saw Braden. It looks like he made a run for it.” Mr. Crum takes this opportunity to ask Eddie, “and, just how were you involved?” Eddie replies, “I wasn’t.” Mr. Crum asks Eddie again, “you weren’t involved?” Taking Mr. Crum’s question to be a statement, Eddie replies, “I’m glad you agree.” Mr. Crum, now getting irate, tells Eddie, “that was a question, not a statement! Now, please answer me!” Eddie smiles, and replies, “I wasn’t involved. So, there. Go suspend someone else.”

Not wanting an argument with Eddie at the moment, Mr. Crum turns to Mark, and asks, “and, how were you involved?” Mark replies, “I wasn’t involved either.” Mr. Crum stupidly asks Mark, “then, why are you sitting in my office?” Mark replies, “what are you, stupid or something? You called me to your office. That’s why I’m sitting here! Geesh.” With his blood beginning to boil, Mr. Crum boldly informs Mark, “any further remarks like that out of you, and I’ll suspend you immediately!”

Interrupting the meeting, Mr. Zunde informs Mr. Crum, “no, you won’t. You will not be suspending Mark. If you recall, you asked Mark why he is sitting in your office. I’m sure Mark did not show up on his own accord to watch this circus. And, as Mark clearly pointed out, you called him to your office.” Eddie laughs, adding a little fuel to the fire. Mr. Crum, quickly realizing that he will not win the argument with Mr. Zunde, replies, “I’ll get back to that issue.” Mr. Zunde wittingly replies, “no, you won’t. Now, move on.”

Focusing again on Braden, Mr. Crum asks, “so, you claim that you just pulled Charles off of Lynn?” Braden replies, “that’s right. And, his flimsy ass ran right into that wall.” Lynn interjects, “everyone saw it.” Ignoring Lynn, Mr. Crum asks, Braden, “did you look for a teacher?” Braden replies, “no! By the time anyone got there, Chuckie’s fat ass would have kicked Lynn’s ass. And, everybody knows there ain’t no teachers in the hallway during class change!”

Mr. Crum mulls over the situation, and announces, “I’m sure all of you know that fighting is not allowed in school. Lynn and Axel, it is clear that both of you have been involved in a physical altercation, so I’m going to have to suspend both of you.” Lynn exclaims, “how about my camera? Chuckie broke it!” Mr. Crum informs Lynn, “there’s nothing that I can do about that. Your parents will have to take that up with Charles’ parents.” Lynn, trying to hide her tears, tells Mr. Crum, “this isn’t fair!”

Braden tells Lynn, “don’t worry about nothing. If Mr. Crum’s ass is gonna suspend us for fighting, I’m gonna drag Chuckie’s ass across the street after school someday, and kick the shit out of him off school grounds. And, there won’t be any witnesses. Then, I’ll just keep kicking his fat ass until he buys you a new camera. And, there ain’t nothing Mr.

Crum can do about it.” Mr. Crum turns an eerie shade of white, and tells Braden, “no, you won’t!” Braden asks Mr. Crum, “oh, yeah? And, who’s gonna stop me? I can tell you it ain’t gonna be you.”

Mr. Zunde interrupts, and informs Mr. Crum, “you really have a sticky situation here. First, it’s clear that Charles Black destroyed Lynn’s camera. Second, all Braden did was to pull Charles off of Lynn and push him aside. Breaking up a fight cannot be construed as fighting in school. You should already know that since we’ve been over that many times before. And, I might add, there are no witnesses contrary to what you’ve heard here today. If anyone is to be suspended, it should be Charles Black.” Mr. Crum replies, “it’s clear, Mr. Zunde, that Charles, Axel, and Lynn were fighting in school.” Mr. Zunde replies, “so what? Go ahead and suspend them then. But, I can assure you of this. When Braden kicks the shit out of Charles Black off school grounds, I can guarantee you, you will not be suspending him.” Mr. Zunde just gave Braden the green light to kick the shit out of Chuckie, but to do it off of school grounds.

Mr. Crum sits back in his chair, analyzing the situation. Mr. Crum realizes that Braden could easily make good on his threat to kick the shit out of Chuckie off of school grounds, and there is nothing that Mr. Crum can do about it. And, Mr. Zunde, pointing out that there are no witnesses to the contrary, has again checkmated Mr. Crum.

Realizing that he is in a no win situation, Mr. Crum announces, “okay. For right now, I’m not suspending anyone. But, I have my eyes on every single one of you.” Hearing that phrase many times before, Eddie laughs. Mark asks Mr. Crum, “can we go now? We’re missing class.” Mr. Crum brashly replies, “yeah! Get to class! I’ll deal with this later.” Which, he won’t. Mr. Zunde will make sure of it.

Out in the hallway, Mr. Zunde asks Braden, “what really happened in the hallway this morning?” Braden explains, “it went down just like I said. I pulled Chuckie off of Lynn, and pushed him away. But, I braced my foot against the wall, and pushed his ass real hard. I’m surprised his ass didn’t go right through that wall.” Mark adds, “the Chuckie did take a step or two. So, it looked like he was running to me.” Mr. Zunde laughs, and tells Braden, “I think you scared Mr. Crum a bit when you told him you were going to kick Chuckie’s ass off school grounds until he pays for Lynn’s camera.” After a short conversation, the students head back to class. Mr. Zunde heads back to the gym, and will inform Mr. Frazier of what happened.

The next day, Eddie arrives at school, and walks into the first period classroom. Eddie places a bag on Lynn’s desk and walks toward the window, taking a seat with the tribe. Looking across the room, Eddie sees tears of happiness coming from Lynn’s eyes. Inside the bag is a brand

new Nikon F2, which is one model newer than her Nikon F, and a 50-millimeter lens just like the one Chuckie broke. In the bag is also an auto winder, an expensive option that Lynn did not have on her camera that Chuckie destroyed.

Regardless of Mr. Crum being on the warpath, the track season progresses well. This year, Northside wins every meet, often winning every event. Many of the athletes have already qualified for the State invitational meet, already delivering performances superior to last year's. Mr. Frazier was able to find Joe Sepulveda, a freshman high jumper. Sepulveda didn't try out for the indoor track team simply because he was unaware that there was a high jump event during the indoor season. Mr. Frazier invited Sepulveda to one of the practice sessions, discovering that he is more than competitive enough for the team. Sepulveda was subsequently added to the team roster.

Early one Saturday morning, Eddie and Mark head out to a track meet. This meet, however, is not their meet. This is Kathy's and Paula's meet. The University is participating in a divisional track meet, with twelve colleges and universities competing. Held at the coliseum which hosts the high school State invitational meet every indoor track season, the turf is very familiar to Kathy and Paula. Today, however, Eddie and Mark will not be anywhere near the track, but will be sitting in the stands.

Eddie meets up with Mark in the stands, waiting for the meet to begin. Looking down from their seats, they spy Kathy and Paula standing with their teammates. Mark mentions to Eddie, "well, this is certainly a different perspective." Eddie replies, "yeah. I feel like I should be warming up or doing something." Walking to the lower level, they try to get Kathy and Paula's attention. Finally making eye contact, the girls know where their support team is seated, ready to cheer them on as they compete.

The meet begins with the men's 40-yard dash. In college, the men do not compete with the women, so Kathy and Paula will be only running against other women. Eddie and Mark watch as the men's 40-yard dash gets underway. Both bringing their stopwatches, Eddie and Mark time the events as they are run. Finding that most of the times are in the upper five to lower six-second range, Eddie and Mark are not overly impressed.

Eddie does some quick math in his head, and figures out that a ten-second 100-yard dash is ten yards per second. The rough equivalent in the 40-yard dash would be four seconds. At the start of any sprint, there is a time loss because the runners are starting from a standstill. Accounting for this, a time in the mid to lower four-second range would seem more competitive. Eddie mentions, "these guys aren't too fast." Mark replies, "I can see that. No one's run faster than us yet."

After the men are finished with their preliminary heats, the women are up in the 40-yard dash. The first heat is run, with the runners delivering times that Kathy and Paula have beaten before. Kathy and Paula are up in the second heat. Standing behind the blocks, Kathy and Paula are carefully checked out by their competition. Kathy, at six feet tall, and 180 pounds, and Paula, at five feet, eleven inches, and 175 pounds, tower over most of the runners. With a very closed circle in track and field, one of the competitors, wearing number 322, mentions to Kathy, "hey, I haven't seen you before." Kathy tells her, "I'm a freshman. I'm so excited! This is my first big meet!" Number 322 tells Kathy, "these girls are fast. Good luck." Kathy replies, "oh, thank you very much. Good luck to you, too!"

The Starter announces, "on your marks." The women get into the blocks. The Starter announces, "set." The runners get in the "set" position. Kathy is ready to run and, even though she is a freshman and this is her first big race, she fully expects to win. The buzzer is sounded, and Kathy lets out her trademarked primal scream as she leaves the blocks.

A few yards out of the blocks, no one is clearly in the lead. A few yards later, Kathy and Paula break from the pack. Halfway through the race, Kathy is in the lead, with Paula close behind. Paula and Kathy, for some reason, always seem to run better when they are up against each other. Today is no exception. Kathy crosses the finish line first, with Paula right behind her. The rest of the pack finishes a half-second to a second later.

After the race is over, with a bit of an attitude, the 322 girl tells Kathy, "well, that was pretty good, for a freshman." Kathy replies, "I hope I ran fast enough to make the final." The 322 girl, not knowing how to react, tells Kathy, "well, from the looks of things, you have a lot better chance than the rest of us."

Listening to Kathy, Paula is amused. Kathy knows she has made the final. Paula also has made the final, and knows it as well. Eddie and Mark, watching from the bleachers, cheer, both knowing that Kathy and Paula have made the final. They can see it on their stopwatches.

On the track, Kathy seems to have developed a new personality. Kathy, conducting herself with a very pleasant and friendly, yet naive, attitude at the starting line, acts as if she's never run in a race before. This gives the opposition the impression that she is an easy take down on the track. At the end of the race, Kathy gives the impression that she does not know how well she's done. After all, using Braden's tactics on the track is not likely to work beyond high school. And, these are college students. Mark's distraction techniques probably won't fly too far either.

Before lunch, the call is made for the women's 40-yard dash final. As expected, Kathy and Paula have both qualified. Watching from the stands, Eddie and Mark are sitting at the edge of their seats. Kathy and Paula, spotting Eddie and Mark in the stands, wave to their boyfriends. At the starting line, the contenders look each other over, seeing if they recognize anyone from prior competitions. One contender, wearing number 485, coldly asks Kathy, "so, you're the freshman?" Kathy replies, "yeah. This is my first big meet! Paula's a freshman too." Paula waves to number 485, not saying anything. Apparently, the girl wearing number 485 is not too friendly.

The Starter tells everyone, "this is the final for the 40-yard dash. Good luck to all of you. On your marks." Announcing, "set," the Starter watches carefully as everyone gets ready to run. The buzzer sounds, and the runners are off. Kathy, letting out her primal scream, startles the runner next to her.

After ten yards, number 485 is in the lead. Kathy has a lot of work to do, and only 30 yards left to do it. Knowing that it is not Eddie in front of her, Kathy cannot allow number 485 to win. Giving it her best, by 30 yards into the race, Kathy overtakes number 485. Paula is right behind Kathy, tied with number 485. Not letting up, Kathy pushes herself toward the finish line harder than she ever has in her life. At the finish line, Kathy takes first place. Paula edges out the girl wearing number 485 by a few inches, taking second place. Not very happy with the outcome of the race is the girl wearing number 485, taking third place.

Kathy and Paula give each other a high-five. Kathy exclaims, "that was fun!" At their first big meet of their college career, they both placed in the one event that is usually won by juniors or seniors. As the 485 girl looks at Kathy and Paula in disgust, Paula whispers to Kathy, "I think we made a new friend. She doesn't seem too happy that she lost." Kathy whispers back to Paula, "then she should run faster."

Seeing Kathy and Paula win, Eddie gives Mark a high-five. Eddie and Mark cheer, wishing they could be down on the track to greet the winners. But, for today, they are stuck in the stands as spectators. The plan was to meet Kathy and Paula after the 40-yard dash final, and find some lunch. Eddie and Mark see Kathy and Paula heading to the locker room, so they decide now is a good time to go and meet them.

Kathy and Paula exit the locker room and, upon seeing Eddie and Mark, Kathy exclaims, "did you see us run?" Eddie replies, "yeah! That was awesome!" The couples kiss, and walk around looking for a bite to eat. Paula asks, "so, what's it like being up there in the nosebleed section?" Mark replies, "I feel like I'm left out of the action." Paula replies, "aw, now I feel sad." They find some lunch, but Kathy and Paula have to

eat light. Their next race is an hour away, which is the mile medley relay, where they'll be joining Barbara and Genise. After lunch, Eddie and Mark head back up to the stands, and Kathy and Paula rejoin their team.

The call is made for the mile medley relay. Kathy, Paula, Barbara, and Genise, making a great team, will be running this event. Kathy and Paula will each be running the 220-yard legs, Genise will be running the 440-yard leg, and Barbara will be running the 880-yard leg. Paula, who is slightly stronger in the 220-yard event, will be leading off. She will be handing off to Kathy as she did last year in high school.

Their heat comes up, which is the first heat in this event. On the track with Paula is the girl wearing number 485, who was edged out by Paula earlier today in the 40-yard dash. The Starter announces, "on your marks." Paula is ready, but the 485 girl, staring at Paula, has a score to settle. The Starter announces, "set." The buzzer sounds, and Paula takes off as if she is taking control of this event. After all, anything 220 yards long is her race.

During the first 50 yards, the 485 girl, in the lead, is running a strong race, giving Paula a run for her money. The other contenders are slightly behind, but this is college. The runners in the field are the best of the best. At the halfway mark, Paula takes a slight lead. The 485 girl glances over at Paula, wondering who she is and where she came from. During the last half of the race, it's all Paula. Making some decent gains over the pack, Paula hands off to Kathy, who leaves the transition zone letting out her primal scream.

Kathy takes off like an Amazon woman on a mission. Not about to be caught, Kathy maintains the lead. This team has practiced together for several months. If Kathy can deliver her baton to Genise before anyone else hands off, their team will likely win. As Kathy approaches the transition zone, Paula cheers her on. The 485 girl, standing with her hands on her hips, quickly realizes that there are a few new kids on the block. Kathy hands off to Genise, who now has almost a ten-second advantage. Kathy lies on the ground to catch her breath, watching as Genise rounds the track.

Back up in the stands, Eddie comments to Mark, "wow! It looks like they both ran an awesome leg!" Mark mentions, "yeah. I can see that. It also seems like everyone gets along really well with their opponents." Eddie replies, "that's because you, me, and Braden aren't down there running, bro." Mark laughs, and replies, "yeah, all that psychological warfare we started with McCutchen in seventh grade. Look at how many races it has won us. Even Mr. Frazier is in on it now." Eddie comments, "yeah, and it's not only on the track. Mr. Zunde tears Mr. Crum to shreds every chance he gets."

Back on the track, Genise, still in first place, hands off to Barbara. Last year, no one was able to pass Barbara on the track in this event, or any event for that matter. On the flip side, Barbara passed quite a few runners in this race last season. Barbara's best half mile is just over two minutes. If anyone gets remotely close to her, she has more under the hood than anyone can tell. By the end of her second lap, Barbara realizes she has the race wrapped up, but she does not slow her pace. There are other heats today, so everyone must run their best. On her last lap, Barbara sprints toward the finish line, taking first place in their heat. The relay team members exchange hugs, and head to the team bench.

Eddie and Mark sit back and relax, watching as the meet moves from one event to another. With barely a minute or two between heats, the meet moves along very quickly. Eddie mentions to Mark, "the college meets seem to move along a lot faster." Remembering what Mr. Ruff pulled during the first meet this year, Mark adds, "it's because that Centerville coach, Mr. Ruff isn't here." From the stands, the meet seems to move along smoothly.

Unknown to Eddie and Mark, many of the athletes on the other teams get seriously irate when they lose, but they hide it well. This is because scholarships are on the line. If the athletes don't perform, and win, they could lose their scholarships.

The end of the meet brings the awards ceremony. With twelve teams competing, winning an award is a great honor. The Meet Announcer introduces today's officials, and recognizes the athletes for their efforts today. The Announcer mentions that a lot of good times have been delivered today, and the competition has stepped up a notch this year. It's no secret to some to whom the Announcer is referring.

The announcement introducing the winners of the 40-yard dash is made. Kathy's name is called, and she stands on the first place tier. Paula's name is called next, and she stands on the second place tier. The girl wearing the number 485, takes her place on the third place tier. Number 485, a junior named Liz Duncan, now has a name to go with her number. Anyone who has been around this division knows that Liz fully expected to take first place in the 40-yard dash today. As Liz looks over at Kathy and Paula with an evil eye, it's not hard to see her discontent. The winners are draped with their medals, and the crowd cheers. As they leave the stage, Liz whispers to Kathy and Paula, "you two are going down." Ignoring the comment, Kathy and Paula return to the bench, where they are congratulated by their coaches and team.

Later in the ceremony, Kathy, Paula, Genise, and Barbara are called to the stage again. This time, they receive the gold medal in the mile medley relay. Liz, whose team won the silver medal in this event today, expected

to win the gold medal as they did last year. The freshmen have apparently posed a bit of a problem for some of the upperclass. The gold medalists in the mile medley relay wave to the crowd as they leave the stage, and the crowd cheers.

After the ceremony, Eddie and Mark meet up with Kathy and Paula. Eddie gives Kathy a hug and a kiss, as does Mark to Paula. The girls show off their medals, which they really weren't expecting to win today. Eddie and Mark get to meet the rest of the University's team again. The coaches remember Eddie and Mark from last Autumn, when they participated in this team's time trials. Dr. Braun, the head coach, jokingly mentions to Eddie and Mark, "if I knew you guys were here, I would have put you in a uniform."

On the way out of the coliseum, Eddie mentions to Kathy and Paula, "it looks like all the teams get along well." Kathy informs Eddie, "not for a split second!" Eddie asks, "really? It seems like everyone talked, and smiled a lot." Kathy explains, "if talk is 'you two are going down,' and sarcastically asking, 'so, you're the freshman,' then yeah, there was a lot of that." Paula mentions, "almost everyone out there is on scholarship. If they lose races, they could lose their scholarship." Seeing the light, Eddie remarks, "yeah, I can see that." Kathy adds, "and the smiles were usually accompanied by snide comments like, 'I didn't expect to see you here this year.'" Mark mentions, "that's a good one. I'm going to use that on someone."

With four people and four vehicles, Kathy, Paula, Eddie, and Mark decide to head to the pizzeria for dinner. Kathy and Paula didn't get much to eat today since they had to run. And, at the pizzeria, Joe will be glad to see Kathy and Paula draped with their medals. The plans, after having pizza, are to find somewhere and relax for a while. They all head out, with everyone happy that Kathy and Paula placed in their first big meet.

A few weeks into the Winter semester, a familiar face finally returns to school. After being absent for a few weeks, Goldstein, who is out on bail, walks into physics class, along with Chuckie. Goldstein boldly takes a seat next to Braden, and Chuckie takes a seat next to Eddie. Haynes, who has been sitting on the other side of the classroom, takes a seat next to Wendy. Eddie pays neither of them any attention, but rather continues talking with the tribe about the next upcoming four-way meet. Goldstein, whose jaw was broken by Braden during tryouts after Goldstein tripped him on the track, now has his jaw wired shut. Goldstein's right shoulder, which suffered torn muscles, torn tendons, and a severe dislocation, is in a sling. Unable to write or speak, Goldstein is clearly only in school for attendance purposes.

Miss Amherst walks in and, astutely recognizing a potentially serious problem, tells Goldstein and Chuckie to move to the other side of the classroom. Miss Amherst is not too concerned with Haynes, who usually sleeps in class. Chuckie and Goldstein remain seated, and ignore the teacher's command. Requesting one more time that Goldstein and Chuckie relocate to the other side of the classroom, Miss Amherst is again ignored.

Subsequently, Miss Amherst tells Lynn Berson to go to the administration office and get either Mr. Crum or Mr. Shapiro. As Lynn leaves, Chuckie still remains in his seat with his arms crossed. Goldstein would probably have his arms crossed too, but his right arm is pretty much nonfunctional. And, with his jaw wired shut, he has nothing to say.

Braden whispers to Mark, who is sitting next to him, "maybe he can't hear shit anymore." Mark whispers back, "well, you did break his skull." Braden returns the comment, "yeah, but there ain't nothing worth a shit up there anyway." Mark replies, "good point."

Lynn Berson returns to the classroom with Mr. Crum. Mr. Crum asks Miss Amherst, "what is the problem here?" Miss Amherst explains, "I've asked Charles and Andrew to move to the other side of the classroom twice. They've completely ignored my request." The idiot that he is, Mr. Crum asks, "why did you ask them to move? What's the problem?" Wondering why she even has to answer Mr. Crum's stupid question, Miss Amherst tells Mr. Crum, "the last time Charles and Andrew were sitting next to the track team, Charles and Andrew both started a fight." With no other choice, Mr. Crum tells Chuckie and Goldstein, "Charles and Andy, you can either move to the other side of the room, or follow me back to my office. Which will it be?"

Slow to move, Chuckie stands up, followed by Goldstein. Wanting the white-hot spotlight, Chuckie punches Eddie in his shoulder a few times with all that he has as he walks up the aisle. Seen by Mr. Crum, Miss Amherst, and the whole class this time, Mr. Crum cannot blame Eddie for starting a fight. Barely feeling the punches, Eddie cries out, "please, please, someone stop the Chuckie from beating me up! Someone, please get Erika! I can't take it anymore! No, wait! We're supposed to get a teacher! Someone find Mr. O'Brien!" Eddie pretends to cry, and the class laughs hysterically.

Mr. Crum exclaims, "that's enough out of both of you! Charles, get to my office immediately!" Goldstein is at least wise enough to take a seat on the other side of the classroom. Goldstein may have learned something in the last few weeks. Either that, or he doesn't want to land in the hospital again.

Chuckie, however, on his way out of the classroom, decides to kick the shit out of Mr. Crum. Chuckie proceeds to pummel Mr. Crum, hitting the principal at will in his mid section. At 150 pounds and grossly out of shape, Mr. Crum is no match for the 200-pound Chuckie. Mr. Crum falls to the floor, and yells out, "someone, do something!" On the floor, Chuckie continues to pound Mr. Crum. Eddie yells back, "I'll do something if you don't suspend me!" The whole class laughs at Eddie's remark. Mr. Crum yells out, "okay, okay! Somebody, get him off of me!" The whole class heard what Mr. Crum said. Mr. Crum just agreed to not suspend Eddie. And, as Mr. Crum is being beaten, one student comments, "fighting isn't allowed in school. Mr. Crum should be suspended."

Eddie gets up out of his seat, which is unnoticed by Chuckie. Eddie grins, and points to the fence, telling Mark, "I'm belting his ass to the fence." Mark tells Eddie, "I'm coming." Without hesitation, Braden says, "me too." Eddie grabs Chuckie by the arm, lifting him off Mr. Crum. Placing Chuckie in an arm lock, Eddie takes him out of the classroom, accidentally running Chuckie's face into the door on the way out. The whole class moves to the window to watch what is about to go down. Mr. Crum, however, is very slow to get up.

Eddie directs Chuckie, still in an arm lock, to his favorite fence, as Braden and Mark follow. Arriving at the fence, Eddie tells Chuckie, "if you move, I'm kicking your ass worse than Braden kicked Goldshit's." Chuckie, sobbing like a baby, screams out, "no! Not this again! Stop!"

Eddie belts Chuckie to the fence, with the belt buckle on the other side of the chain link fence. With Chuckie's back to the fence, he's not likely to escape on his own. Braden comments, "so, that's how it's done!" Eddie replies, "yeah. The Chuckie will let you practice on him as much as you'd like. Won't you, Chuckie?" Mark comments, "cool! He's strapped in there really good. He couldn't get out if he wanted to!" That's not news to Chuckie, who will have to wait a while for someone to come and rescue him.

Eddie, Mark, and Braden walk back into the classroom, where the students all cheer. Even Miss Amherst, who enjoyed the entertainment, laughs. Eddie asks, "where's Mr. Crum? Did he get sent to the principal's office for fighting?" Miss Amherst laughs, but informs Eddie, "some of the students helped him to the nurse's office. He got beat up pretty bad." Eddie replies, "that's just too bad. He shouldn't have been fighting in school."

Miss Amherst walks toward the window, checking to see whether Chuckie is still belted to the fence. Mark informs Miss Amherst, "he's going to be there for a while." Miss Amherst tells Lynn, "Lynn, would you

please go and tell Mr. Shapiro that Charles Black is belted to the fence. Also, please inform Mr. Shapiro that Charles is cutting my class, and that I'm not too happy about it, and that I will be sending him to detention." Lynn replies, "sure." Miss Amherst tells Lynn, "thank you. And, please take your time. There's no rush. And, please feel free to take your camera and get a good picture of Charles before he is released." Lynn leaves to get the photograph and to get Mr. Shapiro as Miss Amherst begins today's lesson.

Class change occurs, and Chuckie is still belted to the fence. Mr. Crum is in the nurse's office. The whole school is now aware that Chuckie is belted to the fence, and many of the students in the school watched from the windows as it happened. Mr. Shapiro, afraid of approaching Chuckie alone, is hunting down a bodyguard so he can perform his administrative duties.

During second period, Mr. Shapiro, escorted by Mr. Frazier and Mr. Zunde, comes to rescue Chuckie. As if he didn't know already, Mr. Zunde asks Chuckie, "why are you out here cutting class?" Chuckie, still sobbing, exclaims, "Eddie belted me to the fence!" Mr. Zunde replies, "oh, really? That's just too bad. I'll have to ask him later why he did that." Mr. Zunde goes to the other side of the fence to undo the buckle.

Mr. Zunde, who has seen Eddie's handy work before, tells Mr. Frazier, "hey George. Come and take a look at this. This is what I've been telling you about. He couldn't get out of this if he wanted to." Mr. Frazier takes a look, laughs hysterically, and replies, "ingenious! So, this is what I've been hearing about." Mr. Zunde frees Chuckie, who is escorted back to the school, specifically to the assistant principal's office.

For the rest of the day, Eddie, Mark and Braden anxiously wait to be called to the principal's office. The call never came. At track practice that afternoon, Eddie asks Mr. Zunde, "what's up with Mr. Crum and Chuckie?" Mr. Zunde explains to Eddie, "Miss Amherst filled me in on what happened. I don't think Mr. Crum will be bothering you about this one. As for Chuckie, he will probably be suspended or expelled. And, as for Mr. Crum, he left early to go to the doctor." Eddie replies, "wow! Erika really kicked the shit out of Chuckie last year. Imagine what she can do to Mr. Crum." Thinking for a minute, Mr. Zunde tells Eddie, "fortunately, Erika's a whole lot smarter than Chuckie."

A week before the State invitational meet, Mr. Frazier has the team assemble in the arena for an announcement. Opening his meeting, Mr. Frazier announces, "as you know, we have a lot of athletes going to the State meet again this year. I will run down the list, and then I have some interesting news." Mark comments to Eddie, "I wonder what kind of news he has." Eddie replies, "Mr. Crum is going to be the new assistant coach."

Mark laughs at Eddie's comment, as Mr. Frazier continues, "in the 40-yard dash, we have Eddie going. In the 220-yard dash, Mark. In the 440-yard dash, Braden. In the 880-yard run, Mitchell, Akinmola, and Johnson. In the mile, Mitchell and Akinmola. In the shot-put, Bobby B. Now for the relays. In the mile medley, Hoffer, Erika, Tessa, and John. In the 4 by 440 relay, Eddie, Mark, Braden and Johnson. And, finally, in the 4 by 880 relay, Akinmola, Johnson, Mitchell, and Amber. I cannot even express how pleased I am with the entire team this year."

With more athletes going to the State invitational meet than any prior year, the team cheers. Mr. Frazier announces, "now for the interesting news. Mr. Ruff, the Centerville coach, has lodged an official complaint with the State. He believes some of the athletes on this team are taking steroids, leading to better performance on the track. The State has heard his complaint, and everyone participating in the State meet this year will have to undergo a drug test for performance enhancing drugs. Dr. Janet Barnett, who is sitting on the end of the bleachers, will escort everyone whose name I have just called to the restrooms in the school lobby, where you will have to pee in a cup. If I have called your name, please follow Dr. Barnett upstairs now."

On the way up the stairs, Eddie comments, "I wonder where all this came from." Mark smiles, and mentions, "I know where." Eddie asks, "well?" Mark explains to Eddie, "during the first four-way meet this year, I overheard Mr. Ruff telling some other coach that it looks like we're all taking steroids. So, when I passed by McCrutchen, I whispered, 'steroids. That's where it's at,' to him after the 4 by 440 relay." Eddie replies, "seriously? That's kind of funny. And he believed you?" Mark tells Eddie, "if he fell for the Prickly Sea Spider thing, he'll fall for anything. And, anything McCrutchen finds out, he always tells his stupid coach."

The State invitees line up in the school lobby in front of a restroom. They go in one at a time, where an official restroom monitor makes sure the sample is properly collected and delivered. Dr. Barnett takes this opportunity to inform the athletes of the dangers of taking steroids. She also mentions that, due to time constraints, they will learn of their results on the day of the State invitational meet. One by one, they submit their samples, and head back to practice.

The next week goes rather well for the team in the sense that no one has heard from Mr. Crum. For some unknown reason, Chuckie is still in school. The rumor is that Chuckie's mother entered the school in a furor, telling Mr. Crum that something must be done about Eddie. Somehow, Chuckie's mother is convinced that Eddie is to blame for Chuckie's rage when he beat up Mr. Crum.

On other fronts, a few students try to start up a conversation with Goldstein, knowing that he still has his jaw wired shut and can't speak. After seeing what almost happened to Chuckie, Goldstein figures that being on the business end of another fight with the tribe might not be too wise. With any luck, Goldstein and Chuckie might make it to graduation in one piece.

The morning of the State invitational meet arrives, and the invitees meet at the school. Eddie drives to the school, picking up Kathy on the way. Kathy is not only excited because of the meet but, in a week, she and Eddie will own the home they have been looking forward to. The team gets on the bus, taking the short trip to the arena where the meet is held. Another bus, which is full, carries the spectators. Any overflow is directed to the team's bus.

The bus driver takes a route to the arena through the town behind the high school, taking the scenic route today, which will add about five miles to the trip. On the way to the meet, Kathy stares out the window, admiring how beautiful the wooded neighborhoods are. As the bus passes by the road that their future house is on, Kathy tells Eddie, "look, hon. That's where we're going to live." Eddie tells Kathy, "it really is peaceful around here." Kathy sighs, and puts her head on Eddie's shoulder. After the thirteen-mile drive, the bus arrives, and the team disembarks.

The team meets in their designated bench area. Barbara, Kathy, and Paula fill the runners in on what is known about the competition. The big news this year is that there is a runner from Liberty High School who will give Braden a run for his money. John Cavallari, a senior from Northport, will be fighting Mitchell and Akinmola for the gold medal in the mile. Wendy informs Bobby B. that he has no competition in the shot-put this year. Eddie will be up first in the 40-yard dash, and is again the number one seed.

Mr. Ruff, the Centerville coach, walks by the Northside bench, checking out Mr. Frazier's team. When the team sees Mr. Ruff, a few of the athletes stand up and break into bodybuilding poses. Mr. Ruff is certain that the whole team will be disqualified due to steroid use. Mr. Ruff, whose only entry this year is his 4 by 440 relay team, expects to see his team proudly stand on the first place tier. Mr. Parker, the coach from Henderson High School, is absent today. All of his talent has graduated last year, and his team is in the rebuilding mode.

The call is made by the Meet Announcer for the 40-yard dash. The team wishes Eddie good luck. Mr. Frazier, Eddie, and Kathy head to the starting line. Since Eddie is the number one seed, he is in the first heat. Eddie's only real competition this year is Duane Harris, running for

Central. With such a vague school name, everyone wonders where Central is. Mark had commented once that Central is in the middle, in the middle of nowhere. With the race about to start, Mr. Frazier and Kathy move over to the coach's area located near the finish line.

The Starter tells the first heat to get ready. Eddie sets his blocks and, looking over at Duane Harris, mentions, "I really didn't expect to see you here this year." Harris asks, "why not?" Eddie doesn't answer Harris, leaving great uncertainty as to why Eddie offered the comment. The Starter announces, "on your marks." The runners appear to be ready, and the Starter announces, "set," followed in a few seconds by the buzzer.

Eddie is out of the blocks and, at ten yards, is in the lead. At twenty yards, Eddie has clearly broken from the pack. Crossing the finish line first, Eddie heads right to Kathy, who is standing with Mr. Frazier. Harris finishes in second place, with a performance that could probably win the gold medal if it were not for Eddie. Mr. Frazier gives Eddie a high-five, telling him, "way to go! Way to go!"

The second heat approaches the starting line, and Eddie, Kathy, and Mr. Frazier walk back to the team area. On the way, Mr. Frazier informs Eddie that he will be in the final, but Eddie already knew that. The final for the 40-yard dash will be coming up earlier than normal this year, so Eddie rests on the bench with Kathy. Mark is up next in the 220-yard dash, so Mr. Frazier and Paula head to the starting line.

Eddie asks Kathy, who appears to be deep in thought, "what are you thinking about?" Kathy replies, "our house. We'll have a lot of time to make everything just like we want it. I was picking out colors in my head. And, all that wallpaper has to go." Eddie agrees, telling Kathy, "yeah. That's the first thing we've got to get rid of." Kathy asks, "so, when are we going to find the time to do all this?" Eddie informs Kathy, "we're not. We're going to hire Mark and his father. That's what they do for a living." Kathy exclaims, "wow! And, all this time, I was wondering how we were going to get all this stuff done." Kathy tells Eddie, "Braden's up next, so I got to run."

Kathy and Braden head to the starting line along with Mr. Frazier. Already at the starting line is Mikhail Sokolov, the 440-yard dash star from Liberty High School. With him is his coach, Viktor Pushkin, who looks like he defected from Russia with only the clothes on his back years ago and hasn't bought anything since. Kathy tells Braden, "there's your only competition. His name is Mikhail Sokolov. He's been unbeaten all year." Braden exclaims, "that's coming to an end! Ain't no one kicking my ass! Bring it on! Let's get this ass kicking underway!"

While Braden is ranting, Mr. Frazier tells Kathy, "it appears like we're up against the Russian Olympic team." While Braden is getting onto the track, Kathy looks over at Sokolov, noticing he looks worried. Sokolov has heard about Braden, and knows that Braden is the number one seed in this event. Sokolov should be worried.

The Starter tells the runners to get ready and move to their lanes. Mr. Frazier and Kathy move over to the coach's area. The Starter announces, "on your marks." Braden can hardly be still. Announcing, "set," the Starter waits for the runners to be motionless, which seems difficult for Braden. The buzzer sounds, and the ass kicking is underway. Braden, although he is in the lead at 110 yards, quickly realizes that this is not going to be an easy race. Sokolov is surprisingly keeping up rather well with Braden.

In the coach's area, in his Russian accent, Mr. Pushkin tells Mr. Frazier, "your man is very good. I've heard about him." Mr. Frazier replies, "thank you. And, it looks like your guy is pushing him hard." As Braden approaches the 220-yard split, Mr. Frazier exclaims, "he's clocking at a 46!" Braden, in the lead, is on track to break the State record. Kathy yells, "faster," which Braden hears as he is running. Kathy tells Mr. Frazier, "if Braden's on track for a 46, Sokolov is sub-50." Mr. Pushkin mentions to Mr. Frazier and Kathy, "they both are looking very strong." A sub-50 second 440-yard time in high school is quite impressive, as Mr. Zunde would say.

Braden comes around the final curve, knowing now that he is going to win. Hearing Mr. Frazier's comment and Kathy yelling "faster," Braden knew something is up. Giving it all he has, Braden crosses the finish line first, with Sokolov crossing three seconds later.

While Braden is recovering, Mr. Pushkin tells Mr. Frazier, "congratulations! Your man is to be highly commended." Mr. Frazier, returning the compliment, expresses, "and your man is the first one to give him any competition in two years. They both did very well." Mr. Pushkin tells Mr. Frazier, "I guess we'll see you again in the Spring, sir." The two coaches shake hands, a welcome relief for Mr. Frazier compared to the torrent of constant strife offered up by Mr. Ruff. As it turns out, Mr. Pushkin is a very respectable coach.

Braden, now recovered from the race, asks Mr. Frazier, "how did I do?" Mr. Frazier exclaims, "that was a 46.8! You broke the State record!" Braden exclaims, "that's because I'm the chief ass kicker! I knew something was up when I heard you yell something. I didn't know what you said, but then I heard Kathy yell 'faster.' Wow! I can't believe it!" Sokolov and Mr. Pushkin come over to shake Braden's hand. Mr. Frazier is glad to finally find a coach who acts in a sportsmanlike manner.

On the opposite end of the congeniality spectrum, Mr. Ruff watched the heat from the sidelines. Mr. Ruff figures the odds of Northside being disqualified in the 4 by 440 relay are quite high. Last year, Eddie broke the State record in the 40-yard dash. This year, Braden just broke the State record in the 440-yard dash. Mr. Ruff figures something must be up, specifically steroid usage. Mr. Ruff now shifts his attention to the 40-yard dash final, which is up next.

The call is made for the 40-yard dash final. Mr. Frazier, Kathy, and Eddie move to the starting line. Eddie is in lane three, indicating that he had one of the best qualifying times during the preliminaries. At the starting line, Eddie asks Kathy, "how much do I get again if I win?" Missing the fun and games at the starting line, Kathy replies, "a gold medal still gets you a three-thousand dollar bonus." The rest of the runners hear Eddie and Kathy's conversation. Eddie and Kathy used this dialog last year, but none of the finalists, except for Duane Harris, have heard it before.

Eddie and Kathy's dialog irritates Harris, who also made the final. Catching Harris by surprise, the Starter announces, "on your marks." The Starter then announces, "set." The buzzer sounds, and the 40-yard dash final is underway. Eddie, who is out of the blocks very quickly, takes an early lead.

At twenty yards, Eddie has a good lead over Harris. Four other runners, all bunched up, battle it out for third place. At the finish line, Eddie crosses first, taking the gold medal this year. Second place goes to Harris, who is getting tired of being beaten by Eddie. Third place goes to Mikhail Sokolov, running for Liberty. At least Harris did not get beaten by Kathy this year.

At the finish, Mr. Frazier congratulates Eddie, giving him a high-five. Mr. Frazier exclaims, "that was an awesome run!" Kathy gives Eddie a hug and, when Mr. Frazier turns away, Kathy gives Eddie a kiss. Turning back around, looking at Eddie and Kathy, Mr. Frazier smiles and comments, "don't think I didn't hear that!" Kathy gives Eddie another kiss, and Mr. Frazier comments, "you can kiss him all you want if it will make him run faster!"

Also noticing what is going on is Mr. Ruff, who is sure Eddie will be disqualified from the race. After the 40-yard dash final, Mr. Ruff heads over to the Meet Clerk's desk and brashly asks, "can I find out if anyone has been disqualified due to steroid use? Are the results in yet?" The Meet Clerk informs Mr. Ruff, "the test results will be delivered by the doctor before the end of the meet. She's on her way." Mr. Ruff asks, "what's taking so long?" The Meet Clerk informs Mr. Ruff, "all of the results were compiled yesterday, on Friday. We couldn't deliver the

results to all the teams simultaneously under those conditions.” Pressing the issue, Mr. Ruff asks, “when will we know?” The Meet Clerk finally has to tell him, “you can ask the Meet Director, Dr. Karakova.” Mr. Ruff asks, “can you get him for me?” Reluctantly, the Meet Clerk pages Dr. Karakova.

Arriving at the Meet Clerk’s desk, Dr. Karakova is not too happy to see who is there waiting for him. Dr. Karakova cordially asks, “Mr. Ruff, what can I help you with today?” In a demanding tone, Mr. Ruff asks, “I want to know when the drug test results will be in. Can you tell me?” Dr. Karakova replies, “they’re expected by the end of the meet. Any disqualifications will be made after the events are all over.” Obviously irritated, Mr. Ruff asks, “why wait until the meet is over?” Giving Mr. Ruff some wisdom, Dr. Karakova explains, “if I had the test results before the meet, I could disqualify athletes before the meet began. But, since I don’t have them, any disqualifications will have to wait until after the meet. I am not about to disqualify anyone in mid competition. That’s just the way it is. And, let me take this time to remind you. Your complaint to the board was delivered late in the season. If your complaint were delivered earlier, the test results would have been available a few days before the meet began.” Mr. Ruff walks away disappointed, clearly demonstrating why he is not the Meet Director and Dr. Karakova is.

After a long afternoon, the call for the final event is made. The 4 by 440 relay is the only event in which Centerville is participating this year. In their heat, Centerville will be up against Northside, Central, and Liberty High School. Liberty has participated in this event before, but was not a strong contender until Sokolov came along. Two other teams in the first heat, Washington and Union High, are unbeaten in this event this year in their division. But, they are not likely to beat Northside. Mr. Frazier, Kathy, and Paula head to the starting line with Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson.

Mark asks Mr. Frazier if he can run the anchor leg so he can run against McCutchen. Remembering how Mark and the 4 by 440 relay team creamed Centerville in the first meet of the season, Mr. Frazier agrees. Looking around at the field, Braden tells Mark that he will probably be up against Sokolov, who can run a sub-50 second quarter mile. This does not concern Mark too much, as Mark can also run a sub-50 second quarter mile. So can Eddie, and so can Johnson, not to mention that Braden broke the State record in the 440-yard dash earlier today.

Mr. Ruff stands proud and tall with his team, quite confident that Northside will be disqualified. Looking over at McCutchen, Mark smiles. That’s about all it takes for Mark to distract McCutchen these days. But, nevertheless, Mark points to McCutchen’s feet, leaving great uncertainty as to what he is bringing attention.

The Starter tells everyone in the first heat to get ready. Braden gets on the track, exclaiming, “this is my second ass kicking of the day! Who’s ready to get their ass kicked?” Kathy mentions to Paula, “if Braden goes to college, he’s going to have to stop doing that.” Paula replies, “yeah, but you know he won’t.”

The Starter announces, “on your marks.” The Starter then announces, “set.” The buzzer is sounded, and Braden is off to set another record. After Braden’s first lap of the two-lap leg, Mr. Frazier exclaims, “he’s clocking at 46 to 48! Can you believe it?” The rest of the team is glad to hear that, for an early lead is always good. The first to enter the transition zone, Braden hands off to Johnson. Mr. Frazier exclaims, “that was a 47 quarter!” Mr. Frazier’s time is approximate, but nevertheless represents an awesome run.

With a good start to the race, Johnson intends to extend the lead. During Johnson’s first lap, McCutchen makes the mistake of a lifetime, yelling out to Mark, asking, “so, are you still juicing¹?” Mark gives McCutchen the thumbs up, which is clearly seen by Mr. Ruff. With Centerville currently in second place, Mr. Ruff is looking forward to the gold medal. Back on the track, Johnson, in first place, extends the lead. Eddie gets on the track, waiting for the baton. Johnson comes around the final curve, with no one remotely close to him. Johnson hands off to Eddie, who takes off like a wild man.

While Eddie is on his first lap, Mark sees that he will be up against McCutchen and Sokolov. After Eddie’s first lap, Mark gets on the track waiting for the handoff. Mark waves to McCutchen in such a way suggesting that he get away from the track, pointing out to McCutchen that his team is way behind. Eddie hands off to Mark, who is ready to wrap up the season. Mr. Frazier exclaims, “another 47 quarter mile! These guys are really clocking!”

Mark begins his leg knowing that he cannot lose. For anyone to beat Mark, they would have to run a quarter mile in under 40 seconds. Since the world record for high school in a 440-yard sprint is 44.5 seconds², it is not likely McCutchen or anyone else will catch Mark. Mark’s opponent, however, is the clock. Mark, knowing what Braden’s and Johnson’s times were, is out to clench the State record in this event. After Mark’s first lap, Mr. Frazier exclaims, “look at him go! He’s going after the record!”

¹ Juicing: A slang term for using anabolic steroids.

² The 440-yard dash record is 44.5 seconds, set in 1971 by John Smith, which still stands at the time of this writing.

During Mark's final lap, he gives it all he has. Crossing the finish line at 3:15.3, the 4 by 440 relay team has, in fact, broken the State record.

The team cheers wildly, giving each other high-fives. Mr. Frazier exclaims, "a new record! Can you believe it? These guys were clocking!" Kathy, jumping up onto Eddie's hips, gives him a huge hug. The team watches as the rest of the contestants cross the finish line.

Mr. Pushkin, the Liberty coach, comes over to congratulate Mr. Frazier and the rest of the 4 by 440 relay team. Liberty, taking third place, finishes just behind the second place Centerville High School team. Heading back to the bench, the team does not care what else happens in this event. No other team in the remaining heats will come close to breaking the State record.

The team has a half hour before the awards ceremony, so they use the time to get pizza. Mr. Frazier no longer objects to the team eating pizza. Mr. Zunde, who usually eats a pristine diet, even has a few slices himself. Mr. Zunde is almost convinced that pizza is part of a secret training protocol. With the team's performance this year, he might be on to something.

After dinner, they return to the arena, where the awards ceremony is about to begin. The Meet Announcer introduces today's officials, and congratulates all of the athletes for making it to this year's invitational meet. Mr. Frazier is again at the high point of his career. While they are waiting, Mr. Frazier updates Mr. Zunde on the day's events. Mr. Zunde spent most of the day at the field events area with Wendy, taking notes on next year's competition. With Bobby B. graduating this Spring, Mr. Zunde knows the gold medal in the shot-put will not be a free lunch next year.

The announcement is made, introducing the winners of the 40-yard dash. Eddie is called to the stage, and stands on the first place tier. Duane Harris stands on the second place tier, and Mikhail Sokolov on the third place tier. When Eddie is draped with his medal, the entire bench, knowing that this is only the beginning, cheers. Eddie returns to the team bench, where he sits with Kathy.

In other individual events, Mark takes the gold medal in the 220-yard dash, breaking the State record this year, and gets a special medal for that accomplishment. Braden takes the gold medal in the 440-yard dash, also getting a special medal for breaking the State record. In the big event of the meet, Mitchell, Johnson, and Akinmola respectively take the gold, silver, and bronze medal in the 880-yard run. Previously, no team has ever taken all three medals in one event. In the mile, Mitchell takes the gold medal and Akinmola takes the silver medal. Akinmola's time

today would have taken the gold medal last year in this event. Akinmola is almost assured of taking the gold next year after Mitchell graduates.

The focus then turns to the field events, where Bobby B. is called to the stage for the gold medal in the shot-put. Bobby B. receives a special medal for setting a State record in that event that is not likely to be broken for years to come. Apparently, all that special care Bobby B. and Erika give to the shot-put has paid off.

In the relay events, Hoffer, Erika, Tessa, and John win the silver medal in the mile medley relay. This relay team will likely win the gold medal next year when most of them are seniors. And, in the 4 by 880 relay, Akinmola, Johnson, Mitchell, and Amber take the gold medal.

The Meet Announcer then introduces the winners of the last event of the day. The Meet Announcer declares, "in the 4 by 440 relay, first place goes to Northside High School. Running for Northside are Axel Braden, Eric Johnson, Edward Bogenskaya, and Mark Svoboda." The 4 by 440 relay team takes their place on the first place tier.

Called to the second place tier is Liberty High School, and called to the third place tier is Central High School. Eddie whispers to Mark, "I thought McCrutchen's team came in second." Mark whispers back, "yeah. Me too."

The gold medal winners are draped with two medals, one for winning their event, and another for breaking the State record. The crowd cheers, and the medalists wave to their fans.

Not everyone, however, is cheering. Over at the Meet Clerk's desk, no small disturbance arises. On the way back to the bench, seeing Mr. Frazier and a few other coaches at the Meet Clerk's desk, Eddie, Mark, Braden, and Johnson take a slight detour. Seeing Mr. Ruff in a heated rage, Eddie tells Mark, "I wonder what his problem is this year." Mark replies, "the same as last year. Someone pissed in his cornflakes this morning." Johnson comments, "maybe it's that time of the month." Listening from a distance, the 4 by 440 relay team tries to figure out what is going on.

Dr. Karakova is overheard telling Mr. Ruff, "he tested positive, so your team had to be disqualified." Mark asks his relay team members, "did you hear that?" Eddie replies, "yeah. I wonder who it was." Listening further, Mark hears Dr. Karakova tell Mr. Ruff, "I understand your concern, but Todd McCutchen tested positive. There are two disqualifications in this meet. One was in the shot-put, and the other was your runner." Mr. Ruff continues to yell, screaming, "how about Northside! Just look at all of those guys! And, one of them even admitted to taking steroids!" Dr. Karakova, having enough of Mr. Ruff, explains, "everyone on Northside

tested negative. They're clean." Mr. Ruff exclaims, "that can't be!" Dr. Karakova responds, "they all took the same drug test. The test does not lie."

Mr. Ruff, still bent out of shape, points to Mark, exclaiming, "it's that one! He admitted to taking steroids!" Mark laughs, telling Eddie, "wow! Their coach is really having a shit fit." Eddie adds, "yeah. Worse than Mr. Crum's shit fits."

Mark, wanting to hear more, walks up to the commotion convention, and whispers to Mr. Frazier, "McCutchen's the sucker of the year. So is his coach." Mr. Frazier whispers back, "yeah. I'd say so. Unfortunately they don't give medals for being a sucker." Mark comments, "well, lollipops could kind of look like medals. Maybe we could make a special medal for them. A lemon lollipop could be the gold medal for the first-place sucker." Mr. Frazier laughs, always getting some enjoyment out of Mark's sense of humor.

Mr. Ruff, directing his attention to Mark, exclaims, "you told Todd you take steroids! Am I right?" Mark raises his voice, telling Mr. Ruff, "yeah, I told him that! And, he's a sucker to believe it. Just like he's a sucker to check his shoelaces when I tell him they are untied. Just like he's a sucker to check his shorts when I told him his diaper is leaking. Just like he's a sucker when I told him he got bitten by a Prickly Sea Spider and his tendons are going to rot away. And, in the Spring, I'm going to tell him his balls are shriveling up because he takes steroids. And, the first thing he's going to do is feel them to check. And, you're a sucker to believe any of the crap he tells you. You must really be a special kind of stupid to believe all that Amazon woman crap last year! They should give you a gold medal for being the sucker coach of the year!" Listening to Mark's rant, Mr. Ruff turns a vibrant shade of red.

Angered by Mark's last comment, Mr. Ruff starts chasing Mark, telling him, "get over here!" Mark runs backwards and in circles, wearing the Centerville coach out. Mr. Frazier, Eddie, Braden, and Johnson laugh as Mr. Ruff attempts to catch Mark. Braden mentions to Eddie and Johnson, "Mark is kicking his ass big time!" Eddie tells Braden and Johnson, "hey, it looks like a game of Kill the Man with the Ball." Referring to Mr. Ruff, Johnson points out, "check it out. He runs like a five-year-old girl." Mr. Frazier laughs, hardly believing what he is seeing. Mr. Ruff finally gives up trying to catch Mark, and walks back to the Meet Clerk's desk.

Dr. Karakova asks, "okay, are we done here?" All out of breath, Mr. Ruff responds, "for now. But, you haven't heard the end of this!" Dr. Karakova tells the irate coach, "actually, yes I have. After today, the meet is closed. And, I will not be addressing this, or any further issues."

Mr. Ruff tells Mr. Frazier, “well, what do you have to say for yourself?” Sick and tired of Mr. Ruff’s antics, Mr. Frazier replies, “nothing. I’m too busy developing undetectable steroids in my lab behind our gym.” Mr. Frazier walks away, with the 4 by 440 relay champions following him. Mr. Ruff exclaims to Dr. Karakova, “did you hear that!” Dr. Karakova calmly replies, “yes. And I’ve heard everything Mark said, but apparently you haven’t.”

Mr. Ruff goes back to his bench, wondering if McCutchen was actually taking steroids or whether it was a setup. After all, Mr. Ruff believes that Dr. Karakova has never paid one bit of attention to any of his complaints. But, as usual, Mr. Ruff would be wrong. Dr. Karakova, at Mr. Ruff’s request, had all the athletes participating in the State invitational meet tested for steroid use. Unfortunately, for Mr. Ruff, that backfired in a big way. Mr. Ruff should be embarrassed, but he’s not. At the end of the day, Dr. Karakova is confident that Mr. Ruff will have an even more interesting complaint come the Spring.

At the team bench, Mr. Frazier encounters a lot of college scouts trying to recruit his team members. Mr. Frazier lets the scouts talk with the team, hoping that some of them may pick up a scholarship. With the team taking so many medals, news reporters and photographers also gather around the Northside bench. The team poses for photographs, displaying their medals proudly around their necks. When the reporters approach Mr. Frazier, he instructs them to talk with the athletes, telling them that today is their day.

With the indoor track season now officially over, Eddie is clearly much faster than he was last year. Although Eddie won every event this season, he did not push himself to his limit during the indoor season. Mark broke the State record in the 220-yard dash, surprising even himself. Braden is at his best, breaking the State record in the 440-yard dash. Bobby B. completely destroyed the State record in the shot-put during this meet. The 4 by 440 yard relay team is the best the State has ever seen. And, Mitchell is undefeated in the mile this year. Johnson, likewise, has won or placed in every regular season event he has participated in.

Monday, at school, the medalists all proudly display their medals around their necks. Word has gotten around very quickly that Braden has broken the State record for the 440-yard dash, Mark has broken the State record in the 220-yard dash, the 4 by 440 relay team has broken the State record, and Bobby B. has shattered the State shot put record that had stood for many years. It’s no secret how that news got around. Before the first bell rang, Braden must have told a hundred people. By the end of the day, everyone in the school will know of Braden’s accomplishments.

Monday morning starts with physics class. Eddie, and the tribe, sit in their usual place near the window, discussing why Chuckie never got suspended for beating up Mr. Crum. After all, beating up the principal should be considered a serious offense. But, as it turns out, Chuckie got sent to detention in lieu of suspension. Detention, however, is far worse than suspension for Chuckie, since it cuts into his pot smoking time.

Miss Amherst, who attended the State invitational meet, walks in. She is well aware of the events that occurred over the weekend. After taking attendance, she asks Eddie, Mark, Braden, Johnson, Mitchell and Bobby B. to come to the front of the classroom. Miss Amherst, announces to the class, "Eddie, Mark, Axel, Eric, Gary, and Robert have all won several medals in the State invitational meet in track and field this past weekend. They've also broken several of the State records! We have learned a lot about physics in this class, and they have taken what they have learned and applied it to their sport. Please give them a round of applause!" The class cheers and applauds, and the athletes again feel that their efforts are appreciated beyond the track.

With little time off before the Spring season begins, tryouts will begin on Wednesday next week. This does not give the team much of a break, but, for the medalists, the week of tryouts is a break per se. As Kathy pointed out many times in the past, during tryouts, Eddie must have run a total of 540 yards during each Spring tryout session. That can hardly be called a workout.