

Eddie, The Collegiate Sophomore

Chapter Three Flashback

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Heading out to the University stadium before the Winter semester begins, Mr. Frazier takes a walk around by himself before any students are back from Christmas break. Recalling the many years he has brought his high school team to the University stadium for the Spring State level competition as a visitor, this is the place he now calls home. While coaching the high school team, Mr. Frazier never really got a good look at the track. He was always too busy with his team to take time to inspect the venue. Too concerned about winning, there was never any time to pay any attention to the track that hosted the victories. And, during this past Autumn, Mr. Frazier was too busy working with the University team to pay much attention to the actual track or the stadium. Today, Mr. Frazier takes the time to look around, examining the track that his team also calls home.

It is hard for anyone not to notice one man standing in the middle of the expansive University stadium, inspecting the grounds carefully as if he is going to buy it. The outdated gravel track is now gone, and has been replaced with a modern all-weather track. Walking onto the track, and standing at the finish line, Mr. Frazier recalls the vast number of high school athletes he coached that crossed this line, claiming victory, and taking home a gold medal. Mr. Frazier stands exactly where he did when Eddie broke the State record in the 100-yard dash, and when Braden broke the State record in the 440-yard dash. And, the acclaimed 4 by 440 relay team crossed this line many times, taking home four gold medals.

Mr. Frazier walks toward the field events area, where Bobby B. won the gold medal in the shot-put for three consecutive years, and Eddie twice won the gold medal in the discus. Adjacent to the launch points for the field implements is a separate set of benches for the field event contestants and their coaches. This is where Mr. Zunde spent a lot of time during the invitational meets.

Looking up at the stands, Mr. Frazier thinks back to the days when there was standing room only during the invitational meets. At one end of the track, the high tech scoreboard and associated electronic timing equipment attests to the commitment of the University to track and field. As he stands on the shot-put pad, the sound of the cold wind blowing through the stands and through the distant trees is the only sound Mr. Frazier hears.

Wanting a better view of the expansive stadium, Mr. Frazier decides to take a look at the track and the field from the top of the stands. Crossing through the gate into the spectator area, he walks up the stairs to an area he's never been before. The wind gets a bit brisker as he makes his way to the top of the stands. Approaching the top row of the stands, from behind him, Mr. Frazier hears a voice out in a distance yelling out to him, "the wind blows cold when you reach the top." Turning around, Mr. Frazier sees someone approaching who is well dressed for the cold weather, which he is not.

The person approaching asks, "I do hope the facilities meet your approval." Mr. Frazier turns around, and replies, "I think it will do." Athena asks, "what brings you out here on a cold Winter day, George?" George explains, "I thought I'd take a look at the track. I've seen it before many times in my life. I'm sad to say that I've never really taken a good look at it." Athena replies, "I don't know about you, George, but, to me, it looks a lot bigger now than it did twenty years ago." George replies, "I didn't realize how big this stadium is until I was out here by myself."

George takes a seat, and says, "Athena, it's not so simple anymore. You can't just put one foot in front of the other faster than the other person, and expect to win." Athena takes a seat beside him and replies, "I know. Trust me, George. I know." George asks, "what do I do now? I feel like they've all walked out on me, well, except for Bonamo." Athena advises, "you don't need any of them, George. It's you that built this team, not them." George confesses, "the season is going to start in a week. I don't want to let my team down." Athena reassures George, "you're the best thing that ever happened to our University's track team. Now, we'll finally see how the team can do without the meets being rigged."

During high school and in college, George Frazier never lost a race. To George, losing was never an option. The 100-yard dash was George's race. He owned it, and it was undeniably his. Unbeaten for years, every sprinter's goal was to beat George Frazier. For eight long years, that never happened. He put one foot in front of the other much faster than all of his opponents. And, he has the medals to prove it. He has the trophies to prove it. For three years, he held the national high school

record in the 100-yard dash to prove it. And, George Frazier received a four-year full scholarship to a major university to prove it.

Before the Olympic tryouts, George Frazier always thought of himself as a winner. At the Olympic trials, George finally met his match. At five feet, eleven inches, and 180 pounds, his primary opponent clearly owned the title of the fastest man in the world. George's opponent was not willing to give up that title, not to anyone. At the Olympic tryouts, George came in fourth place, earning the position as the first alternate in the 100-meter dash. Once having beat the runner coming in third place, George was handed a severe blow that day. To this day, George detests any thought of coming in fourth place. But, George certainly gave it his best, but he realized his best wasn't quite good enough.

In high school and in college, Athena Leighton also never lost a race. The 100-yard dash was her race as well. She owned it, and it was hers and hers alone. For six long years, Athena was undefeated on the track in her event. Like George, she put one foot in front of the other much faster than all of her opponents. And Athena, like George, also has the collection of medals and trophies to prove it. Late in her junior year in college, Athena gave birth to her son Darryl, and hung up her spikes for a year. When she returned to the track, she found that she was no longer number one. While she was still highly competitive on the track, she had dropped back to the level of a non-contender for placing in her event.

Athena never gave any thought of trying out for the Olympics. Athena was, however, driven from her innermost being to accomplish one specific goal. That goal was to beat the time of the woman who won the gold medal in the women's 100-yard dash at the divisional meet during her junior year. When Darryl was down for a nap, Athena would train. When Darryl went to bed, Athena would train. While in graduate school, between classes, Athena would train. During every spare block of time in her schedule, Athena would train. Athena trained not to prepare for competition, but for her own satisfaction.

Taking a chance, one day after a track meet at the University, Athena asked that she be timed in the 100-yard dash. Athena was psyched up, ready to deliver the best performance of her life. Delivering a time that not only surpassed the women's 100-yard dash University record that she, herself, owned, her time was clearly a world class performance. She had met her goal, and delivered a time that would have won the gold medal in the divisional meet during her senior year, and would have shattered the divisional record were she competing. With the Olympic tryouts on the distant horizon, and one year of eligibility remaining, Athena kept up her training.

As in any Olympics, the contenders for a place on the team often arrive as strangers, and leave as friends. On the track, the competitors are adversaries. Off the track, they are eating dinner together and talking about how they got to where they are now. After spending a few weeks at the training camp, the Olympic team members get to know each other very well.

At the Olympic tryouts, George made three good friends. The first was Dawn, whom he married a year later. The second was Athena, who arrived at the training camp by herself, with no coach, not knowing a soul. After the weeks they spent together at the training camp, George sadly lost contact with Athena, who appeared to drop off the face of the Earth after the Olympic games. The third friend George made at the training camp was a younger guy who threw the discus. His name was Gerhard Zunde. Living just a few miles away from each other, George and Gerhard kept in close touch over the years following the Olympics. Eventually, as fate would have it, George and Gerhard worked in the same high school together.

While George, Athena, Dawn, and Gerhard were trying out for the Olympic team, Eddie was riding his new five-speed bicycle he got for Christmas around the block, timing each lap with his stopwatch. Noticing that his second lap around the block was always his best, Eddie's goal was to make his third lap as good as the second lap, if not better. Once he accomplished his goal, it was on to making the fourth lap as fast as the second and third laps.

While Eddie was racing the clock, Mark was racing his dog. Mark would throw a tennis ball, and race his golden retriever to the ball. Sometimes, to gain an advantage, Mark would fake throwing the ball in one direction, and throw it in another direction. Eventually, Mark's dog caught on, and watched carefully as Mark threw the ball. It's not hard to figure out that Mark's dog might be just a little smarter than McCutchen. To Mark, as it was to his dog, it was all fun and games.

When Eddie was riding his bicycle and Mark was running, so was Kathy. Kathy had so much energy as a child that her mother often told her to ride her bicycle around the block just to calm her down. In the Summer, Kathy also expended a lot of energy in the pool. Paula, who lived in another neighborhood on the other side of the elementary school, would join Kathy and their friends for a game of tag in the schoolyard. Kathy and Paula would never get tagged, for they were too fast for their friends to catch. They would also play Frisbee, running around the field having fun.

There is no way that Eddie, Mark, Kathy, or Paula could have known that their future track coach was at the Olympic trials as they, themselves,

started training early for their track career. George could not have possibly known that Eddie, his future track star, was racing against the clock on his bicycle, training for the events he will be running in a few days. George could not possibly have known that Mark was already messing with his dog in a race to get to the ball. And, George had no idea that his two former team assistants were training for competition when, he, himself, was training for the competition of a lifetime. But, the universe brought them all together at the high school and University for a reason.

As the wind blows through the stands, George tells Athena, “now that everyone has left me, I could really use some help with the team. At the high school, I had Barbara, Kathy, Paula, Eddie, and Mark helping out last year. Gerhard took care of working with the field athletes. But, since Paxton was fixing the races, I’m glad he’s gone. I’d rather go it alone than to work with a traitor.” Athena replies, “believe me, George, I know. I can fully understand that.”

Athena reveals, “you know, George. Dr. Braun didn’t really like Dr. Paxton. The only reason Dr. Braun didn’t retire earlier is to keep Dr. Paxton from moving into the position of head coach. Once Paxton got arrested and taken to jail, Dr. Braun felt he could finally retire in peace. If Dr. Paxton were to have moved into the position of head coach, I could only imagine what would have happened with the team’s performance.” Mr. Frazier mentions, “I wish I knew that earlier. I really thought I ran Dr. Braun off.” Athena reassures George, “no, not at all, George. You haven’t run anyone off.”

George, not knowing the protocol at the University, asks Athena, “I don’t even know the procedure to find an assistant coach. Who do I talk to?” Athena replies, “Dr. Karakova is the athletic director. He would be the first person to talk with. But, I have to approve the funding for any of his requests.”

George then asks Athena, “what do I do? Where do I begin?” Athena replies, “put your request in writing, and I’ll be there on the first day of practice to be your assistant coach. That is, if you’ll have me.” George exclaims, “Athena, I’d love for you to help!” Athena adds, “if you find me unqualified, I’ll be glad to step down and help find someone else for you.” George tells Athena, “Athena, coaching is simple. All you have to do is tell them to put one foot in front of the other faster than the other person.” With excitement, Athena replies, “just as long as the other person’s legs aren’t a lot longer!”

Athena knows coaching is a lot more than telling the runners to put one foot in front of the other faster than their opponent. But, Athena is ecstatic at the opportunity to help George with the team.

Walking back down through the stands to the track, George mentions, "Athena, these guys on the team are a lot better than I ever was." Before George can finish what he was saying, Athena adds, "and the women, particularly Kathy and Paula, are better than I ever was." George continues, "they're not even at their full potential. Just look at Eddie. If he were to focus on running, he'd be the fastest man in the world." Athena asks, "how is Eddie not focused? He's the fastest guy in our division." George reveals to Athena, "Eddie doesn't even like to run. He's always looking for short cuts to getting faster. That's how he came up with the training sled. But, you have to hand it to the guy. His invention has helped many of the other runners. He should write a book. I can see it now. 'Track and Field, Eddie's Way.'"

As they walk through the red zone, Athena comments, "over in the exercise physiology lab, they have all this fancy equipment to measure an athlete's performance. They measured Darryl's performance over the years. Darryl is off the charts when it comes to all the technical data they collect." Athena then asks, "there must be something else, George. There's a missing link. What is it?" George confidently answers, "the missing link is in the mind. This Winter, watch the team as they compete, particularly Mark, Braden and Mitchell." Thinking for a moment, George adds, "someday, I'll show you a workout that will be a game changer for everyone."

Thinking back to when Braden broke a four minute mile, Athena finally gets the picture. Athena recalls Mitchell saying, "Mr. Frazier not only trains the body, he trains the mind as well. Anyone can tell you to run laps, and drag a training sled." Mitchell, however, never elaborated on how Mr. Frazier trains the mind. Athena is now hopeful that, with George being his coach, her son, Darryl, may someday realize his dream of making the Olympic team.

As they approach the arena, George turns around, and looks back at the track, telling Athena, "for four years, my high school team has dominated the State meets, right here on this track. There's no reason at all why the University team can't do the same." Athena mentions, "I wonder how the high school will fare now that you're gone." George confidently replies, "Barbara Wyngate is their coach now. Between Barbara and Gerhard, they'll do fine. And, Kathy, Paula, Eddie, and Mark still have their positions as interns. They can handle it."

Quite surprised at what she is hearing, Athena exclaims, "Barbara? She's the girl who ran distance for us!" Mr. Frazier replies, "yes. That's her. She was my team assistant at the high school for three years. She ran with the team during her senior year. Barbara never ceases to amaze me. She knows a lot more than she'll ever lead anyone to believe. She spends all her spare time studying the body." Athena mentions, "if I'm

not mistaken, she holds the divisional record for the women's mile." George replies, "that wouldn't surprise me at all."

Athena then asks, "are you going to miss the high school, George?" George replies, "yes and no. While I enjoy working with the students, particularly the track team, I've about had it with the administration. It's a good thing for Barbara that the principal, Mr. Crum, is out of there. But, there's that assistant principal, Mr. Shapiro, who is a snake in the grass. He's the interim principal right now, and next in line for the position. I hope, for Barbara's sake, he doesn't get it."

Athena asks, "Mr. Crum was that bad, huh?" George explains, "Crum interfered with athletics a lot. Gerhard and I were able to control him and keep him in line, but it was a constant battle. The superintendent, Dr. Noreen Brooks, is Gerhard's cousin, which helped us out a lot. For some reason, Crum was really after Kathy and Paula during their senior year. They really put Crum in his place. And, Eddie, Mark, and Braden always seemed to be at the top of his hit list. But, oddly, he left Mitchell, Bobby B., and Johnson alone. I still, to this day, cannot figure out why. And, it can't be a performance issue. I don't think I'll ever understand why Eddie, Mark, Braden, Kathy, and Paula were always his prime targets."

George continues, "but, get this, Athena. During my performance review one year, Crum seriously downgraded me for not following the State's curriculum closely enough. He suggested that I study the physical education curriculum over the Summer and familiarize myself with it. He told me that I was one step away from being put on probation if I did not conform. And, he didn't give me a cost of living raise that year. That was right after Eddie's and Mark's freshman year, when we started winning big time. I thought I was due a little more credit than what he gave me." Athena comments, "wow! Mr. Crum seems like a real piece of work."

George, finishing his story, tells Athena, "but, here's the kicker, Athena. I was one of the three contributors who wrote the State's high school physical education curriculum! I know every word, sentence, and paragraph in that document, from beginning to end. Athena, I even got a letter of commendation from Dr. Brooks thanking me for my contributions, and for representing the district in a positive light." Athena, who can feel George's heartfelt words, tells him, "I'm so, so sorry that you had to put up with all of that nonsense."

George continues, "I mentioned to Gerhard what happened during my evaluation, and he apparently mentioned it to his cousin, Dr. Brooks. A week later, I was called into Dr. Brooks' office. Dr. Brooks overrode Crum's evaluation, giving me a promotion, and a raise. After that, Crum was after me, Gerhard, and the track team with a vengeance. And, all we did is win, and win big. It seems like the more we won, the more he

would come after us. If there's something wrong with winning, Athena, I want to know what it is."

George backtracks, and tells Athena, "speaking about winning, I want the bulk of the gold medals in the upcoming divisional meet. Then, in the Spring, I want all the gold medals." Athena comments, "that's an immense load to put yourself under, George." George tells Athena, "they can do it. When they come back from break, during that first week, I'm going to tell them that they can do it, and then I will show them that they can do it. After that, doing it will be up to them. That's all I can do. Once they've learned that they can win, it's all up to them after that." Athena comments, "the missing link." George replies, "exactly."

Athena is quite surprised at George's confidence level. But, the team that is returning in the Winter is the same team that went home for Christmas break a few weeks ago. Athena's understanding from her son, Darryl, is that some of the newer members of the distance team could use some work. And, it is clear that some of the new sprinters are not quite up to par. Many of the relay team members still have not perfected the handoff to George's exacting standards. Worse yet, there are a few athletes suspected of rigging the events. With one week before the season starts, Athena is curious about how George is going to accomplish his goal.

On the way into the indoor arena, George asks Athena, "by the way, how did you know I was out on the track?" Athena replies, "I have a good view of the track from my office. I saw you walking out. I just wanted to say 'hi'."

Athena then asks, "does everything meet your expectations?" George explains, "the indoor arena and the outdoor stadium are both awesome. My office, well, I couldn't ask for better. The student assistants are top notch. But, none of that matters. It's the team that really matters. When they get back, on the first day of practice, I'm going to tell them how to succeed at anything they do. Then, they'll set their own expectations. After that, it's all up to them." Athena doesn't venture to ask what George plans to talk about. She'll be there to experience it first hand.