

# RACERS

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## Chapter 1

Most warm-ups are pretty boring. They start out kind of slow and don't have too much action. Oh, they have a little action, but not too much. But—as any runner will tell you—warm-ups are important. They're needed in order to get you ready for what's to come.

You can't just jump into the middle of a race and start running full speed. Well, actually, you can, but it's just not a very good idea. Usually people who start out running full-speed without a warm-up either injure themselves or lose the race. Or both.

Most of us are too obsessed with speed anyway. Most of us, in fact, race through life so fast that we miss a lot of things. A lot of important things. Things that—if noticed—could really change our lives. And the way we live.

I know this is true because I was once a racer myself, but I'm not anymore. It's been hard getting used to a life without racing because I've always loved it so much.

I always loved to run. I'm not exactly sure why, but I think it's probably because it was the first thing that I realized I was really good at. When our P.E. teachers in elementary school made us run laps or sprints, I was always first. It didn't matter how short or how long the race was. I was always first.

I was good at sprints, but I was even better at the distances. My eighth grade basketball coach timed us all in the mile once and said that my time was better than a lot of high school kids. He suggested that I go out for the track team. So that's what I did. I became a miler.

This made my Dad happy because he loved to run, too. He had gone to college on a track scholarship. He got up to run every morning before he drove into the city to work.

My dad had been in the Army for ten years. He enlisted right after he graduated college and became an officer in the Special Forces. Yeah, one of those guys. Parachuting out of airplanes. Repelling out of helicopters. Sneaking up on people at night. All of the daredevil type stuff you see in movies.

He probably would have stayed in the army for life but he injured his shoulder in a training exercise and had to be medically discharged. For the last eight years, he had been an executive for an advertising company, but he still liked to run. And he was still in great shape.

I loved my dad and I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to get a track scholarship and then I wanted to become an officer in the Special Forces after college. Just like him.

My Dad was special. I'd seen a lot of men who tried to play the tough guy part. But with them it was just an act. My Dad was the real deal. He could do 200 pushups, 70 chin-ups, and run a 5:30 mile. He was the base boxing champ at his last overseas assignment, and I don't think he ever met a man he couldn't take in a fight.

But the thing I loved most about my Dad was the way he was around us.

My Dad really loved my Mom, my sister Elizabeth, and me. And he was never embarrassed about saying it or showing it. A lot of men have trouble expressing their feelings towards their families, but not my Dad. He always spent time with us, and, for as far back as I could remember, he had always put his arms around us and had told us that he loved us.

I'm sure a lot of guys think this sounds sort of mushy. Sort of sissy-like. Well, all I can say is you might *think* those things about my Dad, but you would never *say* those things to my Dad. Not more than once anyway. Because, I promise you, you could *not* outrun him. And once he caught you, you would wish he hadn't.

One time a couple of years ago we were all eating downtown in this fancy restaurant when this drunk a couple of tables over started being really loud and obnoxious with his date. The lady looked obviously frightened and embarrassed by the whole scene.

My Dad put down his fork, placed his napkin on the table, calmly walked over to the man and woman's table, and very politely suggested that they needed to leave. The man said something rude to my Dad. That was his first mistake. Then the man, who was

a lot bigger than my Dad, stood up and took a swing at my Dad. *That* was his second mistake. My Dad ducked the man's swing and in one deft movement caught the man's arm, wrenched it behind his back, and escorted the man to the door. Two minutes later, he came back inside, gave the man's date cab fare, and suggested that someone as attractive as she could easily do better than the gentleman he had just escorted out.

He then returned to our table, put his napkin back in his lap, picked up his fork, and resumed the conversation we had been having when he had left.

When we got home, I asked him what he had done with the man when he had gotten him outside. He told me that he had pulled the man's tie off, hog-tied him with it and thrown him in the backseat of a cab. While he was paying the cab driver to take the man home, the man would not stop screaming and cussing, so Dad said that he pulled the man's shoes off and used his socks to gag him.

I loved running, and I loved my dad. And when I became a miler, I loved running *with* my dad. Now we both had an excuse to spend even more time together. He would run with me. He would time me. He would encourage me. Like I said, my Dad was special. He was unique.

When I got to high school, my running also brought me in contact with another very unique man—Coach Harden.

John Wesley Harden had been the Track and Cross Country coach at Elijah Harris High School for twenty-six years. My freshman year he was preparing his track team for their sixth straight state championship. Yeah, that's right—six in a row. But Coach Harden didn't train sprinters. He trained everybody to be distance runners because he knew that distance runners were the key to winning at the State level.

Many people considered him to be one of the best in the country at training high school milers.

Coach Harden and my Dad were a lot alike. Both had a lot to do with toughness. Both stood up straight, looked you right in the eye, and told you exactly what they thought. The big difference was that my Dad was hard on himself while Coach Harden was hard on everyone else.

Coach Harden believed in something called the Paavo method of training. A super intense, train-every-day-ignore-the-pain-and-just-do-it system that had won Coach his last five State Championships.

The Paavo method was named after a man named Paavo Nurmi from Finland who had won nine Olympic gold medals between 1920 and 1932. Nearly all of the modern training methods came from him. High mileage-low speed, interval training, pace setting, and meticulous record keeping.

Paavo Nurmi had been a very interesting man. I did my research paper on him in the ninth grade. I guess you could say he was one of my heroes.

Coach Harden's favorite quote was from Paavo Nurmi:

**“Success in sport comes  
from one thing—devotion”**

To this day, I can still hear that saying ringing in my ears. Over and over. A million times.

It's funny. The things you remember and the things you forget. The things you notice and the things you don't even see.

Coach Harden wanted us all to have tunnel vision. He wanted us all to be so focused on the prize that we were going after that we wouldn't even see anything else. To Coach, *that* was devotion. Most normal people thought it was just plain crazy.

My years under Coach Harden and the Paavo system taught me a couple of things.

The first was discipline. Real discipline. Consistent, controlled repetition. It was the idea of doing something over and over—day after day. And of doing it exactly right every time—no matter what. It didn't matter if you were tired or didn't feel well. It didn't matter if it were cold or raining. It didn't matter if your sister had a birthday party

or if you had a big test. It *just* didn't matter. We ran every day. We stuck with the program. And I learned what true dedication to a goal really was.

The second thing I learned was how to deal with pain. There are all kinds of pains involved in being a miler. There is the general pain of pushing your body to do things that it doesn't want to do. Then there are the specific pains of things like pulled muscles, cramps, and heel spurs. And then there are special pains that come up because you run for Coach Harden.

During my freshman year, two weeks before the State Track Meet, I came down with the flu. We had a big meet at Scarsdale High School that Saturday, and, although I had practiced all week, I really thought that I was too sick to run. Just before the meet started, I gathered up my courage and went to talk to Coach.

"Hey, Coach," I said, "You know I've been real sick this week."

Yeah," he said.

"And I mean, I've already puked like twice this morning," I said.

"Yeah," he said again.

"And...," I said

"And...?," he said

And you really think I need to race today?"

Coach Harden laid his clipboard down, crossed his arms, and looked me right in the eye.

"Let me tell you something, Cook," he said. "If you don't run today just because you feel a little bad, then the next time something isn't just right it'll be a little easier to find a different excuse. Some things in life are just *hard*. That's *just* the way it is. And sometimes life is harder on some people than it is on others. It may not seem fair, and it may not seem right, but it is what it is. And people who are tough make up their minds to just work through the pain and do what's got to be done."

Then Coach Harden uncrossed his arms, picked up his clipboard and walked away. He didn't tell me that I *had* to run, but I knew what he expected.

I ran. I came in second by eight tenths of a second. The kid who beat me was a senior from Scarsdale who placed third in the state later that month.

I threw up as I crossed the finish line and got dizzy and fell off the platform as I was waiting to receive my ribbon.

As the trainer was checking me out, Coach Harden walked up. I was expecting him to give me a compliment for toughing it out.

But all he said was, "If you had kicked harder at the end, you could have caught him."

Coach Harden wasn't big on giving out compliments.

Towards the end of my second year in track all the hard work was starting to pay off. I took first in every race I ran and was knocking seconds off my time every couple of weeks. I ran a lot of miles that year. I was pounding the pavement everyday. In the morning with my Dad. After school at Cross Country and Track practice. I did hill work, sprint work, intervals. Everything. I ran and ran and ran.

Besides being good at it, I think that another reason I loved running was that it was something that I could do alone. My running didn't depend on other people and didn't require other people. All I needed was a pair of shoes and a place to run.

I guess I've always been somewhat of a loner. In elementary and middle school I had a couple of friends that I hung out with but for whatever reason we drifted apart when we got to high school. I had had a girlfriend in the eighth grade.

You know. My first kiss, my first dance, my first broken heart. She dumped me two weeks after the eighth grade dance. Turned out she was between boys and just needed someone to go to the dance with. Anyway, for whatever reason, I didn't have any more real friends or any more dates once I got to high school. I'm not sure of if I gave up on people or if people gave up on me, but I never really missed them. Not too much anyway.

My Mom used to worry about me a lot. You know, she wanted to know why I didn't ever hang out with anyone or talk on the phone or want to go over to someone's house. Elizabeth told her to just chill. She told Mom that there wasn't anything wrong with me, but that I just liked being alone. Elizabeth always took my side.

My Dad also told mom not to worry. He said he had been a lot like me when he was my age. He'd never had a lot of friends in high school either. It made me feel good to think that my dad had once been like me. It made me feel really good.

Once I got to high school the road became my best friend. It was always there for me. It was always the same. It always made me feel better about myself. It never lied to me. It never hurt my feelings. It never made fun of me. The road didn't have any bad days or mood swings. And even though the road ran both ways, it was not two-faced. The road was even. The road was level. The road was constant. I found the road to be everything that people were not.

I loved the road. But the road was a thing, and the problem with loving a thing is that a thing can't love you back.

By the time the State Track Meet rolled around in May of my sophomore year, I was running over fifty miles a week. Coach Harden told me that I had a chance to be the state champion that year in the mile. Only one other sophomore had ever done it in the history of the state. And my time was only five seconds off the all-time state record.

I still remember the conversation that my Dad and I had as he drove me to school the morning of the State Meet.

"Will," he said without taking his eyes off the road. "You know I love you and I'm proud of you."

"Yeah, Dad," I said. "I know."

"And I want you to give it your best today...and I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Yeah Dad, I will."

"But Will, I'll still love you and be proud of you no matter how you do today. Nothing that happens today will affect how I feel about you"

I thought for a few seconds and then I said, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you still love me and be proud of me even if I don't do well today?"

Dad glanced over at me for a second.

“You always say you’d still love me and be proud of me even if I come in last—but I don’t understand that. If I come in last, what would there be to be proud of?”

“There’d still be you,” he said.

As we pulled onto the main road that ran by the school, I remember seeing a sign that I had never noticed before. It was a small white sign with bold black letters on the right side of the road.

***PAY ATTENTION!***  
***YOU’LL SAVE A LOT OF LIVES!***

I had been by that sign hundreds of times, but I had never noticed it before until that day.