

The characters introduced in Mud Run loved running too much to give up the sport completely. So under the coaching eye of Ms. Wellesley, their home room teacher, they continue training through the winter, using the indoor track at the Oshawa Civic Fields.

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Home at the Dome

Outside the tent-like skin of the Oshawa Civic Dome, a January snow storm howled in misery, the wind-driven air cold enough to freeze snot on a shop-teacher's moustache. Inside, the Dome, Matt Thompson and members of his school running club were finishing a workout on the four-lane indoor track wearing shorts and t-shirts as though it were a fine day in June.

“Two more sets,” Ms. Wellesley said. “Get ready in fifteen seconds.”

Ms. Wellesley was Matt's eighth grade teacher. She also doubled as his track coach. Well, not *official* track coach. But since the end of the Cross Country races in the fall, Ms. Wellesley had invited the interested runners from the S.T.Loveys Elementary School to join her at the Oshawa Civic Dome.

Overhead, the roof of the Dome shuddered in the wind. A clump of snow, flapped loose from the roof fabric and began a long, slow, noisy slide to the ground. About that very instant Matt knew that his secret desire was to join the Durham Riders Track Club.

The knowledge came, not as a niggling hint, but as a whole idea, fully formed and complete. There was nothing to precede it; no ramping toward it by small steps. It landed, kerplop! on him in the same way four hundred pounds of snow had just slid from the roof to land with a thud in the snowbank just outside the air-supported Dome.

Matt did realize that his decision to join the Riders had something to do with the way Ashley Grovier watched Riders running. With lean, tight muscles, the high school runners bounded around the track like human forms of the gazelle.

Ashley was a classmate in his eighth grade class, and also a member of the school's informal running club, the 100-kilometre club. She wore a different colour hair band each day, and would often touch his arm just before telling him something important – like, 'Hi!' or 'Can I borrow your homework?' Matt had long before realized he liked Ashley's smile, and he also liked to have his arm touched.

Both he and Ashley had been members of the school's championship cross-country team that fall. It was because of that win the previous October that both were now at the Oshawa Civic Dome waiting for Ms. Wellesley to say 'Go!'. When she did, the club members would all run twice around the track at a pace fast enough to make the last half lap difficult. Really difficult.

"Two more laps?" asked Ryan Abolins, his voice with an edge like a nail file even when he was being nice. Ryan had orange hair and nose rings. "Sure you haven't lost count?"

“Two more,” replied Ms. Wellesley, showing a smile full of teeth. “Your turn to lead, Ryan,” she said. “If you’re up to it. Baz will lead the last one.”

Before they could step on the track, a group of five high school runners – all members of the Riders -- surged by, running strongly.

“Wow! Look at them run,” said Ryan. “I could run like that.” He ran a hand through his orange, spiked hair. “Call me the copper-top bunny.”

“Yeah, right, Rye,” said Ashley. “As if.”

Ms. Wellesley continued. “Ready, guys.” To Ryan she said, “Now!”

Ryan started out, the others following behind like baby ducks behind their mother.

Matt pulled in behind Ryan. Baz Amin, his dark eyes sparkling, settled in just off Ryan’s right shoulder. Though he couldn’t see them, Matt knew that Kathryn Lau, Ashley Grovier, Robert Maxwell, and Gavin Richards had taken their places behind him. As usual, Ms. Wellesley would be at the back of the pack, calling directions if needed.

Not that much direction was now needed. Ms. Wellesley organized routines that kept all the runners together as a group, yet challenged even the best runners before each workout ended.

Behind him, Matt could hear Ashley complaining.

“My Gawd!” she said, never as breathless as she would have you believe. “I mean, wait up!”

Matt smiled, and realized that the others behind them were beginning to string out as the pace took its toll. Even Baz, who always looked so relaxed, had tightened his shoulders. On the curves, Matt could see the corners of his mouth pulled back in concentration.

“It’s not a race, Ryan,” Ms. Wellesley called from the back of the group. “Even pace, even pace.”

As they came up the final straight for their first lap, the group of Riders pulled up on their right and began to easily pass them.

Matt could sense the Riders before he could see them: five, no six of them, five guys and one girl, all two or three years older. These were elite athletes. They were fitter and, faster than him, faster than Ms Wellesley had them running.

What is more, he knew that Ashley was watching them, too.

Matt worked hard. Baz Amin, just off his right shoulder, breathed in grunts. Matt felt good. He put all his focus into maintaining his pace. Ryan moved strongly, two metres ahead.

The high school runners eased by, their stride smooth, graceful and effortless.

Matt checked over his shoulder. From the corner of his eye he could see Ashley, and Gavin Richards, and behind that Ms. Wellesley. Along the straightaway, he was could see the Rider’s coach, clipboard held in the crook of his left arm.

At that moment Matt made a decision. In an instant he pulled out away from Baz. Within three strides he pulled even with Ryan, who flashed one look at him before responding with his own surge.

But Matt had the momentum and eased ahead, his quickened pace and lengthened his stride bringing him even with the last-in-line of the high school runners. From behind, Ryan uttered a word between gasps that was not particularly polite and you should never say in public.

Off the curve under the four-handed clock Matt pulled up behind the last of the high school group. He struggled now to keep up. Ryan followed, grunting out an effort but unable to catch him.

Matt gritted his jaw, his long legs reaching, his arms pumping hard. He couldn't gain on the high school runners. But they weren't pulling away from him, either.

Halfway up the final straight Matt knew he was dying.

His legs turned into tree trunks. His lungs began to burn. His arms became heavy, leaden limbs, like tree branches with no bark. For a moment he lost sight of Ryan.

But two steps later Ryan suddenly re-appeared in the corner of his left eye. He struggled hard, grunting like elephant.

Matt couldn't let Ryan beat him.

He dug even deeper, every muscle now screaming, his fists balled up, white with effort.

This was his time to show off. To Ashley. To Joe. To the Riders.

No one would beat him now. Especially Ryan.

One step, two step, three step, four . . .

They finished their two-lap interval in one-two order, twenty or more paces ahead of Baz, with the rest of the group strung out further back, Ms. Wellesley half a lap back.

“Did you . . . see . . . that!” Matt exclaimed, drinking in air by the lungful. “I kept . . . up with . . . those . . . guys!”

“I was right with you!” said Ryan, bent over, hands on his knees, sucking air.

Almost half a minute later, Ms. Wellesley floated across the line with Ashley, Kathryn, and Robert.

“Even pace, Matt,” she said. “The idea is to do an even pace. Not race.”

“But I . . . can run . . . that . . . fast.”

“For a lap,” said Ms. Wellesley. “Which isn’t the same thing. Look – those high school runners are still going. They’ve got two more laps to go.”

“Actually, just four and a half,” said a man with a clip board at the side of the track. “They’re doing one kilometer repeats today.”

Ms. Wellesley looked at the man. “Thanks, Joe,” she said. “These guys just sometimes get carried away.”

Joe waved his clipboard as though to say, ‘So what, don’t worry.’ Matt knew from being around the track for several months now that the man’s name was Joe Calder. He was the coach of the Riders, a high school teacher, and a former running star himself. That’s what everybody said.

Ms. Wellesley continued. "We'll take a couple of minutes before we do our last interval, then we'll warm down." She came over to Matt. "Not good team move, that," she said. "When we do group intervals like this, keep the pace even."

"Well, I just wanted to see if I could run that fast," Matt replied, still gasping.

"Well, you can," said his teacher. "With middle and long distance it's how long you can run at that speed. Endurance. That's what these intervals build."

"It felt good." Matt panted. "Nobody could keep up with me." He glanced over to see if Ashley had noticed him, or had overheard. He still breathed deeply. Under the soccer net, Ryan was still bent over.

"We're about to start the last interval," said Ms. Wellesley. "Be ready. Right after the Riders come by again."

Joe Calder moved forward. With a sweeping motion of his clipboard he eased Matt and Ryan back off the track. "Mind yourself," he said. "They're coming around again in these outside lanes. Don't want anybody hurt."

Ms. Wellesley herded her group under a soccer net that had been parked on the outside of the track.

"Still think you could run with those guys, Matt?" asked Baz.

"Maybe some day you will," said Ms. Wellesley. "But they are among the best high school runners in the country. Last year, two of Joe's runners made it to the World Cross Country Championships."

“The World? . . . Did you say . . . The World?” said Ryan, still breathing deeply.

Matt watched Ashley watch the group of five runners at the far side of the track.

“Yes, The World. There’s quite a few national level athletes worked out on this track. But mind yourself, don’t be stepping in front of anybody.”

“Did you run with the Riders, Ms. Wellesley?” asked Gavin. “You were a champion.”

Ms. Wellesley smiled, her eyes still on the track. “I’m a runner, always,” she said. “Winning a race or being a champion last only for a day. Running is for a lifetime. Now let me watch the traffic here before we begin our last interval.”

The sessions with two or more track clubs working out always created traffic problems. Fitness runners, including tennis players who often jogged two or three warm-up laps, used the two inside lanes. Sometimes the tennis players would wave their rackets around while they did so, adding a layer of excitement. Track clubs used the outer two lanes for speed intervals. Sometimes sprinters cluttered up the track with starting blocks and step-kick training along the straightaway.

The milers came by again.

“On pace,” Joe Calder said, one eye on his stopwatch. “Keep it up.”

The milers pranced by like frisky ponies. Matt envied them. He pictured himself in high school, training with runners like them, winning races and perhaps someday running for Canada. Maybe Ashley would, too, and they would go to movies after the races.

Joe Calder turned to Ms. Wellesley.

“When are you going back to train with the Riders?” he asked.

The previous fall, Ms. Wellesley had injured her leg while running a race in Toronto. When Matt had started at S.T.Lovey, she had been limping.

“Soon,” she said to the coach. “I thought I had given that ankle enough rest back in the fall. But then I did that cross-country thing at Hyde Park.:

“I remember that,” said Joe. “Won that, didn’t you? I thought you were ready then.”

Ms. Wellesley grimaced. “It’s the old story: too much, too soon. I’m going to try something in the all-comers meet a week Saturday. We’ll see how it works then.”

“No rush,” said Joe. “When you’re ready.”

Matt had been listening to this conversation, while watching the Riders still on the track.

“They’re . . . still . . . at it,” Matt said, between deep breaths.

“You going to be okay?” Ms. Wellesley asked him. “Are you enjoying the sensation of oxygen debt?”

“What’s oxygen debt?” asked Gavin.

“What Matt and Ryan are going through. Breathing hard. Going faster than you can sustain.”

“Oh,” said Gavin, as though he understood.

When Matt nodded, Ms. Wellesley continued. “Okay. Ready? Baz, you lead this time.”

Baz grinned. He made a good leader. He would run at an even pace through both laps. His black hair gleaned.

“And Matt,” she added, “mind you stay behind the leader.”

Matt laughed.

“Now!”

Baz leaned forward and was running.

Matt pulled up just off his shoulder, with Ryan behind him. That was the advantage of the intervals, he thought. As in a race, leading a group was hard work. Even running steady, 60 second laps, following someone else was much easier.

Baz took them through the first of the two laps at exactly 60 seconds. Halfway through that first lap, Matt had begun to work. He focused on the back of Baz’s shoulder. As they began the second lap, Baz began to pull ahead. Ryan pulled up even with Matt’s shoulder.

Baz continued to pull away from both of them. With half a lap to go he ran step in step with Ryan. His legs felt heavy, his breathing laboured. Beside him, Ryan made grunting noises.

From the back of the pack, Ms. Wellesley called out, “Good pace, Baz, good pace. Come on, Matt, Ryan. You’re flailing!”

Matt worked harder now than ever. Still, Baz continued to pull away. He and Ryan continued, step for step. Breath came hard. Every step took effort. From thirty metres back, Matt struggled and watched Baz cross the finish line. Finally, Gavin Richards, the kid from the fourth grade pulled up beside him at the finish line.

Ms. Wellesley and Ashley followed close behind.

“Still want to know what oxygen debt is, Gavy?” Ms Wellesley asked Gavin. “Ask Matt and Ryan. They’ll tell you.”

“I beat ’em, I beat ’em!” said Gavin.

“Only because they both tried to keep up with Riders on the previous interval,” said Ms. Wellesley. “Now everybody come on over here. I’ve got some news about an all-comers meet a week from Saturday.”