

# Running God

Rich Elliott

**O**f all the runners I've ever seen, Robert Evans was the most beautiful and the most damned. He had a stride that was crafted by angels. An engine unfazed by the sharpest pace. And, my God, the way he could sprint! Like those cheetahs on TV—from a trot to a blur in one second.

I remember praying at night, "Please, could you let me have one-tenth of his talent?" Well, be careful what you wish for.

The only season I ran with him was when he was a senior at Milford High, and I was a freshman. Our team was good. When we were on, we were unbeatable. In hindsight, we were like the Roman Empire in its final days. Right before their temples crashed to the ground, did any Romans know their time had passed?

Robert was the last of Milford's oh-my-god runners. Before our season, Milford had won three consecutive State Cross Country Championships. Our guys hadn't just won, they'd destroyed the competition.

People joked that the success was due to Milford's water. Others claimed it was because the kids grew up running the sand dunes along Lake Michigan. Others shrugged and said it was crazy luck, like lightning striking in the same spot. How else can you explain the Milford stats: three individual state champs, five national relay records in track, and fifteen boys getting college scholarships?

The real reason, of course, was our coach. Izekiel "Zeek" McCutcheon. Oh, he was a fire-breather all right.

Coach appeared at Milford four years back, coming from "somewhere in California." No one seemed to know his full story. He may or may not have fought in Vietnam. He may or may not have studied psychology under B.F.

Skinner. He had not broken the four-minute mile, as he claimed. But he had trained, at some point, under Dom Orult, the most notorious running coach on three continents.

One thing we knew for sure—Coach knew running.

In our training he had us doing stuff no one else did. In August we spent a week running in the dunes, sleeping on the ground, no bags or tents, living on nuts and berries. He'd pick out the biggest dune, and he'd pit us against each other in savage games of King of the Hill.

He'd tow us behind his Corvette. You'd try not to fall down. And at the Milford pool, early in the morning, he had contests to see who could swim the farthest underwater. He discontinued this after a couple guys passed out.

Our mileage was epic. He'd drop us off twenty miles outside of town and challenge us to run home "as the crow flies," which meant fording creeks and cutting through farmers' fields. I'll tell you, when you have to get over an electric fence with a German shepherd bearing down on you, it gets your adrenaline going.

You must remember, this was a different era. Our parents were not the over-protective, over-involved parents of today.

And we boys loved it! We performed our rites without complaint. No, we did them zealously! Why? Because to go out for long distance running, you must already be a masochist. And for three years Milford had been Number One—we were drawn to that flame.

Sure, we were brainwashed. When Coach pulled you into his office and slammed the door and pointed to the chair, it was all over. He'd lean close, talking through a cloud of coffee steam, and he'd speak to you as if in a conspiracy, like you were the only guy on the planet who mattered, and his voice would get low and kind of hoarse, and he'd explain why YOU! YES, YOU! were going to be the next Milford state champion. He'd show you how the numbers added up and their logic, and he'd point his bony finger at you, and in that moment you would chug the Kool Aide and ask for seconds.

\* \* \*

Coach was big on nicknames. He probably had some theory about identity. He encouraged his seniors to assign nicknames to every newbie. We were like members of a tribe, each of us named for some quirky trait. So, among others, we had "Ralph" (the kid who puked after every race), "Sarge" (the one with a buzz cut), and "Raunch" (the guy known for lewd remarks).

Mine was "Pip." It was the only nickname Robert assigned. I should've hated it, except that it came from Robert, so I felt honored. For whatever reason the star of our team had taken me under his wing. Maybe it was because we grew up on the same block and he often drove me home from practice. Maybe it was because I was the only one who could make him laugh.

On our way home I was rattling on about *Great Expectations*, the novel I was reading in my English class. I was in my full squeaky mode—my voice hadn't changed yet, much to my embarrassment. I was laying it on thick: "You see, there's this Pip, this really pussy-whipped kid, who's got the hots for this cold, crazy bitch."

I must have made Pip sound like the funniest character of all time because Robert just broke up. He couldn't stop laughing. After that, I was Pip, which everyone thought was perfect for the smallest and squeakiest guy on the team.

Robert was the only person on our team without a nickname. We didn't even call him Bob; it was Robert. Gods don't have nicknames.

Robert was our team captain, elected unanimously. At our high school, to be a captain of a sports team was a big deal—the captains were the princes of Milford. Robert was the obvious choice. Not only was he our star runner, he was also the best person among us. Though we were young, we saw this.

Our team was huge, and the competition among us was dog-eat-dog, a survival of the fittest. Darwin would've loved it. By midseason, by some physiological twist of fate that still mystifies me, I'd moved up through the rank and file into our varsity seven. In cross country, seven guys run in the big meets—it's your first string.

Some of the upperclassmen grumbled about having Pip, the squeaky freshman, in their midst, but Robert never let the ridicule get out of hand.

Robert was en route to a terrific season. He'd done his homework over the summer, logged some big miles, and he'd come back all lean muscle and bone. His close-cropped hair was bronzed by the sun. He'd increased his power and stride with no loss of quickness. All inefficiencies of form were burnished away.

In the first half of the season Robert demolished the fields. He could win any way he wanted—he could set a freaking pace and break away from everyone, or he could sit back, wait until the end, and scorch the leaders with his kick.

Robert's string of successes was a new development. He'd shown flashes of brilliance in the past: As a sophomore he'd run one of the fastest miles in the nation and was written up as "McCutcheon's Next Star." But he'd also been inconsistent. I overheard our number two guy, Tony Grasso, use the words "head case." I learned that Robert, in past seasons, might be right with the leaders, looking great, then inexplicably, he'd be 200 yards behind. I'd read enough about sports to know about the Choke, the mental unraveling that afflicted some athletes. Was that the problem?

Robert's spotty record hadn't exactly endeared him to Coach. I sensed a coolness and tension between them, like maybe stuff had been said. And it didn't take much for everything to come apart.

Years later I could trace it back to one innocent workout. At the time no one really noticed the crack. We were doing an ungodly set of 220-yard repeats,

close to all-out. We were feasting on them, young lions with fresh meat. But on the final one, Robert backed off and finished in the middle of our pack.

"Way to finish hard, Evans!" Coach's voice dripped sarcasm. None of us thought anything of it. We'd all been targets of his slanders.

But later, on the car ride home, Robert just drove and said nothing. I used some of my best material too—I told him about the short story we were reading, about a flakey office worker whose job it was to hand-copy legal documents all day every day. "One day this idiot just stops working and tells his boss, 'I would prefer not to.' Now, how screwed up is that?"

But Robert didn't crack a smile. He didn't even ask how Bartleby—that was the worker's name—came out in the end. He just drove on, all serious like.

\* \* \*

The next meet was a big invitational with tough competition. We were eager. The award medals were huge, and we figured we'd take home most of them.

The gun goes off and we get out great, we're hitting our splits, and our pack is moving up through the field. Robert's way the hell up there where he's supposed to be. Everything's going according to plan. Then we see Robert's red uniform coming back to us, and pretty soon we're passing him.

"Come on, man!" I squeaked. "You can do it!" Like, what else can you say to a struggling teammate?

Our leader's implosion sends a shock wave through our group. I suddenly feel 50 pounds heavier. I begin to notice my teammates' labored breathing. We claw our way the last half mile, and at the end we're getting passed by whole clumps of runners.

We emerge from the finish chute, expecting the worst, and then the announcement over the loud speaker confirms it: Our team places second, beaten by 30 points. Milford's first loss in more than three years.

When we straggle over to the bus, Coach is blocking our way. His look is scary, his black crew cut bristling.

"NO! Not today, boys. You don't deserve a ride home!"

"No COWARDS allowed on this bus. No QUITTERS." He tells the bus driver to pull out. "You guys can run back to school."

We're standing there in the middle of the parking lot. Other team buses are pulling away, their runners gawking at us. We don't know what to think, some of us feel like crying, some are pissed and looking for something to kick.

"Come on, guys," says Robert, "let's run back home."

When we finally drag ourselves back to school and get to our locker room, we hear a shout from Coach.

"Meet in the wrestling room for a party!"

The wrestling room was Coach's venue for our team meetings and upper-body work. I hated the place. To this day, I associate wrestling rooms with grotesque smells, hundreds of pushups, and strange rants.

"First set of push-ups! GET READY!"

Coach was amped. He was holding a cup of coffee, probably his tenth of the day. "On each pushup, I want you to say—'I let my school down.'"

We sank into our set, mumbling the line, our faces deep in the stench of the wrestling mat.

"LOUDER!"

Coach ordered set after set. For each set there was a new variation on the contrition:

"I let my coach down."

"I let my parents down."

"I let myself down."

After twenty sets of twenty, Coach released us from our penance, and we stumbled out of the room. For hours I couldn't lift my arms. Later that evening, when consciousness returned, I remember having two contradictory thoughts:

I survived that, so I can survive anything.

And—Coach has lost it.

\* \* \*

The next week was misery. Coach wanted us to wear black armbands to school—we declined that humiliation. But we couldn't dodge the other stuff.

Coach had a gift for going after your unique emotional weakness. None of us escaped his taunts:

"Dumbshit! You're running the wrong pace!"

"Princess! Your mom ain't here to help you!"

"Pip, was that a squeak I heard, or was that 'Yes, sir'?"

Coach saved his most outrageous cuts for our star. Robert was struggling, he was all over the place, one day heroic, the next day, hopeless, a false god.

"Evans, you quitter!"

"Evans, you gutless wonder!" Coach raged into the fading autumn light. "Since you insist on running that slow, your whole group is going to repeat the workout!"

On the drive home with Robert, I couldn't help myself, I called him out. "Man, what the hell's wrong with you?"

My hero seemed taken aback. Immediately I felt ashamed. Finally, he said, "Pip, I'm injured. I just can't run right. My hip is killing me!"

"Injured?!" This was the first I'd heard of it. "Then tell Coach!"

"I have, Pip. He says I'm faking."

All that night I chewed on this. Injured? Well, that would explain it. How could you be on your game when you're dinged up? But why would Coach say Robert's faking? The coach of the best program in the state. And come to

think of it, why haven't I seen Robert limping around? He always had the same magical stride.

I couldn't sort it out. It made less sense than that crazy story about Bartleby.

\* \* \*

The days blurred. We runners shrank and shuddered, dreaded the workouts. Robert said nothing, became paler, became even more of a cipher. Coach was implacable.

"Don't QUIT on me, you QUITTERS!"

The night before the Sectionals, the qualifying meet for State, Coach called a meeting for our top seven guys. We slunk onto the wrestling mat.

Coach launched right in. "We have a PROBLEM!"

"Tomorrow we have the second biggest race of the year, and you have no leader."

We locked our eyes on the mat to avoid looking at Robert.

"It is *my* opinion that your current captain is a fake! We've all seen his talent. Yet he refuses to use it. Why? Because he's a coward, that's why!"

From the corner of my eye, I glanced at Robert. He was stone. He was like some stone idol abandoned long ago in the desert. Half his face was worn away, his eyes a thousand years distant.

"It is *my* opinion you need a new captain. But it's your decision. You're gonna vote for captain again. Right here and now."

Coach produced slips of paper. We sat stewing on the sweaty mat. Coach paced off into the far shadows of the room to whisper something to his hapless assistant. Our scribbles recorded, we placed our votes in a passed hat, like offerings at a black mass.

Coach quickly studied each ballot.

"Six votes for Tony Grasso. One vote for Robert Evans. Grasso is our new captain."

The car ride home with Robert took about three years. We hit every stoplight. We didn't speak, we couldn't look at each other, he and I both knowing who we voted for.

Robert and I never really talked the same way again. If you've ever screwed up a friendship with some cowardly act, then you know. At some point later, Robert, being Robert, would treat me civilly. He would look at me, as if from Olympus, with understanding and even forgiveness. That's what hurt the most.

\* \* \*

The next morning, the morning of our Sectional Meet, I woke up with a sore throat and a low-grade fever. When I got to school, Coach took one look at me and decided to run our 8<sup>th</sup> man alternate.

The Sectional Meet course was a beast. The first half featured some sharp turns and three monster hills. The second half dropped into a ravine where

runners had to jump a creek twice and then come up a nasty hill before finishing on a 600-yard straightaway. It was the kind of course that broke people.

I watched as my teammates moved stiffly off the bus like they were going to a hanging. Robert was inscrutable as ever, his head sunk deep into his hood.

I went around to find the best vantage points to see the race. I heard the start-gun in the distance, and the wide motley river of racers rolled by me, the twin embankments of hysterical spectators pressing in on the river and then dispersing wildly in its wake.

Cross country sucks as a spectator sport, but this meet was crazy. A struggling pale sun had failed to burn off a thick fog that lay over the course. Packs of runners would suddenly pop out of the mist and just as quickly disappear. I saw our guys materialize—they were pretty strung out. I spotted Robert back in the masses, looking like he'd forgotten where he was. I felt dizzy.

In the distance, I could hear Coach's strident cry. "Decision point! Decision point!"

The mass of runners plunged into the ravine. We scrambled over to the ridge to watch the action below, but we could see nothing, only the fog in the ravine, a layer of white rubble. I could hear the low dirge of wispy gasping and the muffled patter of racing spikes on grass.

I stared down into the fog, and I tried to will my guys through this stretch. The third quarter of any distance race is a dark night of the soul. It's the moment when your oxygen debt soars, lactic acid is tightening your legs, and you either give in to the pain and back off, or you hang a little longer, hang on the razor's edge of panic, and pray you'll have something left for the finish.

We spectators could hear the clatter of spikes on the gravel hill leading to the final straightaway, and we waited, squinting our eyes, peering into the fog, waiting.

And then from farther up the straight, someone was shouting.

"There he is! There he is!"

I thought I caught a flash of red. Our jersey? And then, my God, it was Robert, our Robert bursting out of the mist, flying over the grass, flying inexorably towards the finish, looking for all the world like some ancient crimson Greek god.

The time-honored convention in footraces is for spectators to applaud respectfully for the winner. But this vision insisted on more. The throng pressed in on the runner's path and raised its voice in primal exaltation. Opposing coaches, many of whom knew the backstory, shouted and were shocked to find themselves tearing up.

As for me, I couldn't yell, I couldn't speak, I could hardly breathe, all was caught in a beating tangle somewhere between my heart and my throat.

Robert won by a hundred yards, our team won by 50 points, and I was sure we could savor our noble comeback and rest on our laurels in the final days before the State Meet, days traditionally reserved for training easy and charging your battery.

I was mistaken. Our victory had vindicated Coach's MO. Obviously, we were a team that needed the frying pan.

Monday's workout wasn't so bad, only a couple slashes of sarcasm. I was back in the lineup, the flu bug having mercifully fled my system. For Tuesday's workout Coach returned to his dark playbook, ratcheting up the pain. It was to be his masterpiece.

We started off with a fast warmup, followed by twenty times the football field, all-out.

"Dammit! Get the lead out!"

Then Coach ordered ten repeats of a quarter mile on the track at well below race pace.

"CHRISAKES, keep close, keep it together! You look like MAGGOTS!"

We dug deep for that set. We glanced at each other with sullen eyes, guys in a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean wondering who would break first. We grinded through the tenth 440 and bent over our knees, trying not to puke. Certain that was the end of it, we walked over to our sweats and sat down.

"NO, NO, NO! What the HELL are you guys doing?" Coach had more in store for us.

"NOW we're going to have some fun!"

We couldn't look at him.

"You're going to run a mile in under five minutes. ALL SEVEN of you. Together, as a pack. If you don't, the group will run another."

We shuffled over to the starting line. Sunset had come and gone, and darkness poured over the track. Coach blew his whistle, and we headed out. We ploughed along, filled with self-pity. The pace languished. Most of us came in around 5:20. Robert was two seconds back. Coach shook his head, as if he'd expected the result.

"Line up. We're going again."

We lunged out around the track for a second try. I don't remember much about this one. I guess I've repressed it. I only remember the times. Six of us ran 4:55. Robert struggled in at 5:30, beaten and miserable.

"Evans, you CHICKENSHIT!" Coach glared at him. "We're going to run these ALL NIGHT, until you ALL get it right!"

The shriek of the whistle. Number three. The hostility is exploding.

"Evans!" says one guy, "Christ, help us out here!"

"Come on, you pussy!"

"What the hell, Evans? You're killing us!"

I was drowning. I drained my last reserves hanging onto the guy ahead of me. I was dimly aware of the sound of Robert grunting. The sound seemed

to be receding. Somehow we made it to the last lap. I no longer cared. The moonless night didn't care. We were going to hit the time, and Robert was not. We were going to be circling the track all night and forever.

And then from behind us, an insistent crunch, crunch, up-tempo on the cinders. Robert is blasting around us, but it's not Robert. It's some imposter. It's some graceless wildman clawing at the air, some ragged escapee from an asylum. He is twenty yards ahead, then forty.

He's right in front of the finish line, right in front of Coach, when we hear a sickening snap. I'm looking around for a starter's pistol. Robert is sliding on the cinders, writhing, holding his lower leg, his teeth bared. I can attest to the fact that a rupture of the Achilles tendon sounds like a gunshot. And also to the fact that the victim's leg no longer works. He cannot step, cannot stand, because his calf muscle is no longer attached to his heel.

\* \* \*

I insisted my dad take me to the hospital that night, and we waited there for several hours until a surgeon finally emerged and told us we might as well go home. He'd done the best he could to repair the leg, he said, but Robert was heavily sedated and would be out until the next day.

We were turning to leave when the surgeon said, "You know, it's the strangest thing. We took a bunch of X-rays. Besides the ruptured Achilles, he also had stress fractures in the left hip and the right tibia. It was apparent the cracks have been there for a while."

The surgeon shook his head. "I have no idea how that boy has been running all these weeks."

On the way home from the hospital, I tried to talk to my dad about the whole thing.

"I don't know what to do."

It was hard talking to my dad. He wasn't the type you could open up to. Our "talks" usually went nowhere.

"You always have a choice, son."

Really, Dad, I thought, that's all you got?

\* \* \*

The State Cross Country Championship. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that because cross country is a minor sport, the State Meet must be kind of lame, attracting a few cultists, a bunch of long-suffering parents, and a couple reporters pissed off about their beat. You would be wrong.

The spectacle brings some 20,000 people—busloads of cheerleaders and band members, crowds of alums, clumps of principals and AD's and teachers, hordes of friends, families, college recruiters, T-shirt hawkers, running shoe vendors, former state champs, dozens of writers, and a small army of volunteer workers.

Add to that, the best top-7's from the best teams all over the state, dressed in new crisp uniforms, a riot of multicolors, the racers all sleek and carved from a million miles of speedwork.

Coach spoke to us before our warm-up, and for once he had little to say. That was OK, we didn't need any scripts now. We were on autopilot.

We went through the ritualistic steps of our warm-up—the jog, the stretching, the sips of water, the lacing of spikes, the initial wind sprints, the skittish procession over to our starting box, the stripping off of sweat pants, and the final strides.

We move into our starting box, and we receive the last well-wishes from parents and friends. But we're looking at Coach, he's studying us, his mouth just a thin crease. We take off our sweat tops, and now our black armbands are visible for all to see. People are pointing and saying stuff, but everything seems muffled now, and action has slowed. On our black armbands, the bold white letters say R.E.

From way off we see the starter raising his pistol, and over two hundred runners from 30 teams are leaning forward, crouching over the starting line, waiting for the report, which finally comes, and a massive cheering from three sides, and 29 teams are bolting forward, jockeying for position, nervous energy exploding. And we seven from Milford are standing, standing still, watching the tide recede, our fans behind us gaping. And now Coach screaming, throwing his clipboard, smashing his stopwatch. My teammates are looking at me to deliver my line, but I open my mouth, and at first I come out with just a croak, my voice deciding at this moment to change, until finally, turning to Coach, I get the words out, and this time they are the sound of a young man, and I'm saying, "We would prefer not to, Coach."

\* \* \*

Coach McCutcheon left after that school year. I heard he went back to California and was coaching at another school somewhere. He stayed in coaching for a while, but he never stayed anywhere long. Later I heard he was selling protein supplements and energy drinks. I bet he was good at it.

We got a new coach at Milford, a kindly old man who knew nothing about running, and we all loved him. In my senior year, I made it back to State, and this time I actually raced. I even got a medal, 25<sup>th</sup> place, the last medal awarded at State.

Years later I became—what else?—an English teacher. I like to think I entertain my students with my goofy interpretations of literary classics, but I'm probably kidding myself. Teens are a tough audience. But then again, remember, I'm a masochist.

I also coach the cross country team, and I'm known as the most laid-back coach in our conference. We've never made it to State, though we've come close a couple times.

And what about my friend Robert? The fact is, he never ran cross country or track again. He went to some Big Ten school, I forget which one. I heard he eventually joined the soccer team as a walk-on. I heard that in his senior year his teammates chose him captain.

I sometimes have this daydream. I picture my friend, gliding down the field during a soccer game. I see him racing beautifully along the left flank and then taking a perfect crossover pass from a teammate. He collects the ball in full stride, and then he shifts to another gear and in a split second he's got the defender back on his heels and just smokes the guy, leaves him in the dust. And then the running god is streaking forward, and he slams the ball into the top right corner of the net. I picture this, and I smile.