

**DEDICATED TO MY TEAMMATES**  
MEMOIRS OF AN OVER THE HILL ATHLETE  
A Special Day In Our Lives

In anticipation of our upcoming induction into the Highland Park High School Athletic Hall of Fame, and prompted by Joel Lewitz's fantastic effort at reconstructing our team history, which jogged my memory, I was inspired to share my thoughts and memories about that special day.

Each one of us probably has a few defining moments in our lives, peak experiences which stay with us forever and provide us with lasting memories and inspiration which remind us of our true potential in life. November 4, 1961 was one of those moments in my life, and I suspect in many of yours as well.

That PDF document Joel created for the Hall of Fame event was a work of art. Kudos, Joel!!! The team history that Joel reconstructed was rather amazing to me. Firstly, I can't believe he saved all the results of our meets. If Joel had not done that to memorialize that remarkable season, I really doubt that any of us, individually or collectively, could have reconstructed it. I also want to thank Joel for the acknowledgment he gave me in that document for my efforts on that special day. But as he pointed out, our victory on that day was truly a team effort and if anyone of us had even slightly faltered, including Tom Huxley not getting up fast enough after he fell during the race, that would have been all she wrote. Obviously no single individual by himself, even Jim Weinert, could have done it himself. Each one of us played our role on that special day, and I think we will all be tied together because of that experience until the end of our days.

I am certainly proud of the role I played in that team effort. It was an experience which certainly reinforced the lessons Coach Ault had been preaching to us. That race on November 4, 1961 showed me what I could achieve in life...if I would *just believe!!* The seemingly impossible can become possible when we believe it can be done, and act accordingly. Any of us who have participated in competitive sports know that positive attitude is often more important than raw talent when it comes down to winning and losing. If there was one thing Coach Ault repeatedly hammered home it was to keep that positive "I can do it" attitude. However, that is obviously easier said than done, and for most of that 1961 cross-country season I settled into the inertia and security of low expectations for myself. As can be easily surmised by looking over the meet results which Joel reconstructed, my

performances during that 1961 Cross-country season were, to say the least, less than stellar. In most of the meets, I was the fourth, fifth, or sixth runner on our team, and in fact, in several of the meets I didn't even merit a mention in the standings, which made me quite literally an "also-ran." In the Lake County meet, our team took all the top five places, but I was not among them. In most of those meets, I was alternately trading places in the standings with Tom Huxley, Barney Olson and Mike McLaughlin, and on at least one occasion finished behind Jeff Goldman. That certainly represented a significant drop in my cross-country performance from my heyday as a freshman at HPHS when Jim Weinert and I were the first to win varsity letters. In my distant memory was my first race as a freshman against Niles Township High School in which I won our first frosh-soph meet, which was the first and last time I ever beat Jim Weinert. However, with passing time, and with taking the detour to football during my sophomore year, by my junior and senior years, I definitely lost my confidence to succeed in cross-country racing. Frankly, the agony of burning muscles, lactic acid buildup and nausea was something I did not relish. Sprinting is so much less painful. So in truth, during my junior and senior years, I more or less coasted, seeing cross-country more as a preseason training ground and warm-up for track. However, during that 1961 season, it became increasingly clear that we had a unique group of athletes, led by three outstanding runners, Jim Weinert, our star champion, as well as Joel Lewitz and Chuck Redman, who were always finishing high up in the standings not far behind Jim. Coach Ault kept making the point that we had a real chance at winning the State Championship, even though we had not as of yet been able to beat Evanston. Clearly, we were neck and neck with them, and as Joel pointed out, the results of our meets against them would have been different without key members of our team being injured or sick. Towards the end of the season, influenced by coach's inspiration and seeing the dedication of my teammates, who were now dragging me out to morning workouts on the golf course to complement our usual after school workouts, I started getting increasingly excited about the possibilities. During the workouts leading up to the district meet, I remember one workout which required taking several repeat  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile laps around the athletic field, and just for the heck of it I decided to stay on Weinert's shoulder instead of Joel and Chuck's. Although I thought I was going to croak by the end of the lap, I actually maintained myself in second place behind Jim. The coach congratulated me but suggested I drop back with Joel and Chuck during the next lap. But on the second repeat lap around the field I couldn't resist testing myself again by trying to keep up with Jimmy. Of course I couldn't, but once again I was

able to finish in second place. Obviously this was only training, but I started to feel like I was coming out of hiding and starting to get serious about giving it my all, something I had obviously not been doing up until then. However, I still didn't really see myself as being even close to the same level as Joel or Chuck. But I was starting to believe in myself, and at the District Meet, for the first time, I finished in the upper tier of runners, taking 14<sup>th</sup> place not far behind Chuck's 10<sup>th</sup> place. That really encouraged me, and I was getting the feeling that a breakthrough to a new level of performance was just within sight.... *if I would just believe!!*

The day of the State Championship, I felt especially excited and inspired. I made a decision about my game plan for the race. I have always been a front runner, using my sprinter's speed to get ahead and then challenging runners to pass me. Of course that might not be too smart with a lot of others to draft behind me, but that was my style of running in middle distance races, and even though I never had the confidence or courage to try it in a cross-country race (since my days as a frosh.), I thought I would give it a try. So I decided to take advantage of my sprinter's speed and try to be one of the first runners to make it to the first turn at the end of that long starting stretch run. As you probably remember, that opening stretch allowed all the runners to start in tandem and have a long opening stretch to position themselves as the field eventually narrowed heading into the first turn to the left, which I would guess was between a quarter and half-mile from the start. At the end of that opening stretch, I achieved my objective and was one of the first three runners to take that first curve. At that point, the thought went through my head that this brief moment of achievement might be the high point of my race, perhaps my proverbial "15 minutes of fame," although it was closer to 90 seconds. But as I rounded that first turn, I saw another stretch of the course ahead of us that was perhaps another 200 yards before it curved again out of sight. I revised my game plan to a simple goal, thinking "Wow, you made it this far with the front runners, why not just stretch it just a little farther!" I was waffling inside with a struggle between the part of me saying, "What are you thinking, dummy, ease off!" and the part saying, "Wow, this is exhilarating!! It won't last, but just give yourself a few more moments of glory." I made it to the end of the next stretch still among a group of 5-6 front runners. Somewhere around then, Jimmy Weinert pulled up alongside of me and gave me a slap on the butt, shouting "That a boy, Bobby!!" I felt kind of like Seabiscuit getting a gentle tap of the whip from his jockey, and it had a similar inspiring effect. I drafted on Jimmy's coattails for about another 100 yards or so and then as I watched him sailing off into the sunset,

it began to dawn on me that we weren't too far from the halfway point in the race and I was still hanging on for dear life in the rarified air of that group of 5-10 front-runners, so I set my sights on hanging in there with them just a little longer. But I was fighting the feeling that I really didn't belong there and would probably collapse at any moment back into the pack. To resuscitate my waffling psyche, I just made the decision to pretend...to dredge up a flashback memory to an earlier time as a freshman when I was "The Man" before the new king (Jimmy Weinert) was crowned. That was a time in my life when I was shocked to see what I could do at cross-country despite feeling in my heart of hearts that I was really a sprinter. So, there I was after a four year hiatus getting another chance shock everyone, including myself, as to what this sprinter can really do. And that psych job, or self-hypnosis, or whatever it was, was working. With every moment that I was keeping up with the leaders, that old feeling of "I can do it!!" was getting stronger and stronger. Every muscle in my body was burning and grasping for air, but I just kept telling myself, "Wow, look at this, you're doing great!! Just keep it up a little longer!" I'd pick a spot about 100 yards ahead, and just try to keep it up until then, which seemed achievable, and then just another 100 yards, and then just another. I was thinking, "You can do it!! Just ignore the pain, you can do it!!"

Somewhere around the middle of the race, I noticed that Jimmy Holman from Evanston was right ahead of me (How did he get there??). As Joel pointed out in his team history, Jimmy Holman and I went to summer camp together when we were 11 years old. Jimmy was always bragging about what a good runner he was, but he seemed like a blow-hard and I never took him seriously. I was actually rather surprised when years later I saw that he was one of Evanston's top runners. Seeing him right in front of me, and knowing how close this meet was going to be, I knew I had to do my best to beat him. I pulled up beside him and tried to hide my agony by forcing a smile and saying "Hi Jimmy!" As Joel related, his only comment was "Christ, Picker!" No, I don't think he was happy to see me, and I know that he was aware of the fact that I was generally a middle-of-the-pack runner, so I'm sure he was rather shocked to see me there with that group of front runners. I thought this would be a good moment to try to capitalize on his apparent the shock, turn on the gas, and hope he would be a bit demoralized and back off. After I passed him, I sensed that Jimmy Holman was probably not far behind me, but I never gave him the satisfaction of turning around to see how close he really was. However, I did feel like I was being chased by the Boogie Man from Evanston for the rest of the way, which certainly

added more fear and fuel to my inner fire. By the way, if you look closely at the photo Joel incorporated in his PDF document, with me right behind Jimmy Holman before I passed him, you will note a runner coming down the hill close behind us. Can there be any doubt about who that was? His stride is unmistakable. Hi Joel!! I believe it was shortly thereafter that Joel pulled up on both of us, gave me a word of encouragement and then pulled on ahead. But once I saw Joel pick up the speed and push ahead, it also inspired me to try to keep up with him. Keeping Joel in my sights for the rest of the race allowed me to psychologically draft on his energy. So on two different occasions during that race, encouragement and support from my teammates gave me a lift at crucial moments.

The second half of the race was hell. I was hanging on for dear life, but there weren't many runners passing me, and I was getting more and more excited. And then, the race headed towards its climax...THE HILL!! I'm sure you all remember THE HILL about which Coach Ault had been warning us about in preparation for that meet, including those killer stair climbing workouts at the Central Avenue beach by Lake Michigan. So now would be the time to take advantage of all that special training that coach gave us. So I approached The Hill with an extra shot of confidence and a second wind as I powered up that hill. I was in agony, but I knew everyone else was too. By the time I got to the top of the hill, I could see a thin line of runners ahead of me heading down that last home stretch of about a quarter of a mile towards finish-line chute. Those moments were truly The Agony and The Ecstasy. I was doing my best to ignore the agony and pain caused by my body crying for oxygen, but I was absolutely shocked and amazed that there were so few runners ahead of me. I kept waiting to get passed by many runners who had been saving their kicks, but only one runner passed me down that home stretch. I was thinking, "Oh my God, you're really going to do it!" With every agonizing step I was thinking "You doing it!! Don't back down! Don't quit!! You're really doing it! Hang in there!! Just a few more seconds!... You can do it!!...Hang on! Hang on! ...Unbelievable!...There's the finish chute up ahead! You can see it!! Only another 100 yards!! OK, sprinter...sprint your bloody ass off!! ...pump your arms...push, push, push...just a few more seconds... almost there" And then finally, FINALLY the chute. "You did it!!" It took several seconds for me to be able to push myself up from over my knees where I was bent over gasping for air and felt like I was about to pass out. I looked up and saw Joel right there a few guys ahead of me. He turned around and gasped "Hey, Bobby!!" I think he was probably as shocked as I was at my performance.

So, what happened to Jimmy Holman? Until I examined that finish line photo in detail, 45 years after the fact, did it finally dawn on me how close behind me he was at the finish, literally only a few strides back. Yikes!! I had been right about the Boogie Man chasing me. Thank God he didn't catch me!

After the race, the lactic acid finally got the best of me, and I felt rather nauseated, which you can more or less see on my face in the photo of us putting on our sweats with me kneeling on the ground. That was literally the first time I'd ever pushed myself to the point of nausea in a race, something Joel was willing to do in his races almost all the time.

That experience was rather magical and mystical for me. I felt for most of the race that I was in an altered state, like being in an unreal dream, a dream that seemed too good to be true and one from which I would awaken at any moment to find myself "back in Kansas again," i.e., back to my usual mid-level performance. But by the end of the race, when I finally realized that something magical really was happening to me and that the dream was becoming reality, I felt a state of ecstasy beyond any I had experienced to that point in my life. And when we gathered in the gymnasium and heard the final score of the meet, and pandemonium broke loose, it was a state of ecstasy I think we all shared. What a day!

I wish to express my gratitude to Coach Ault and to all of my teammates for helping make us...

**CHAMPIONS FOREVER!!!!**

Your teammate,  
**Robert Picker**

*I would also like to share a children's story which keeps popping into my mind when I think of that special State Championship day...an analogy for the moral of our story.*

***We thought we could...and WE DID!!!***

## THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

(Watty Piper)



A little steam engine had a long train of cars to pull. She went along very well till she came to a steep hill. But then, no matter how hard she tried, she could not move the long train of cars. She pulled and she pulled. She puffed and she puffed. She backed and started off again. Choo! Choo! But no! The cars would not go up the hill. At last she left the train and started up the track alone. Do you think she had stopped working? No, indeed! She was going for help. "Surely I can find someone to help me," she thought. Over the hill and up the track went the little steam engine. Choo, choo! Choo, choo! Choo, choo! Choo!

Pretty soon she saw a big steam engine standing on a side track. He looked very big and strong. Running alongside, she looked up and said: "Will you help me over the hill with my train of cars? It is so long and heavy I can't get it over." The big steam engine looked down at the little steam engine. The he said: "Don't you see that I am through my day's work? I have been rubbed and scoured ready for my next run. No, I cannot help you,"

The little steam engine was sorry, but she went on, Choo, choo! Choo, choo! Choo, choo! Choo, choo! Soon she came to a second big steam engine standing on a side track. He was puffing and puffing, as if he were tired.

"That big steam engine may help me," thought the little steam engine. She ran alongside and asked: "Will you help me bring my train of cars over the hill? It is so long and so heavy that I can't get it over."

The second big steam engine answered: "I have just come in from a long, long run. Don't you see how tired I am? Can't you get some other engine to help you this time? "I'll try," said the little steam engine, and off she went. Choo, choo! Choo, choo! Choo, choo!

After a while she came to a little steam engine just like herself. She ran alongside and said: "Will you help me over the hill with my train of cars? It is so long and so heavy that I can't get it over."

"Yes, indeed!" said this little steam engine. "I'll be glad to help you, if I can." So the little steam engines started back to where the train of cars had been standing. Both little steam engines went to the head of the train, one behind the other. Puff, puff! Chug, choo! Off they started! Slowly the cars began to move. Slowly they climbed the steep hill. As they climbed, each little steam engine began to sing: *"I-think-I-can! I-think-I-can! I-think-I-can! I-think-I-can! I-think-I-can! I-think-I-can! I think I can - I think I can - I think I can!"*

And they did! Very soon they were over the hill and going down the other side. Now they were on the plain again; and the little steam engine could pull her train herself. So she thanked the little engine who had come to help her, and said good-by. And she went merrily on her way, singing: *"I-thought-I-could! I-thought-I-could! I-thought-I-could! I-thought-I-could! I thought I could - I thought I could - I thought I could - I thought I could - I thought I could - I thought I could - I thought I could - I thought I could --"*

THE END