Running with the Story

By Andy Anderson

Early in my teaching career I was a physical and health educator at a rural elementary school near Stratford. To encourage participation in vigorous physical activity I had set up a running course through a near-by sugar bush that was owned by one of the families whose children attended our school. The marked courses ranged in distance and level of challenge. Each time I brought a class to the bush for a run I would jog along with one of the students.

On one of these occasions I was running with a 12-13 year-old, Mennonite boy named Harley. His buttoned up long sleeve shirt, long pants and well-worn, flat-soled Converse running shoes comprised his “gym” uniform. As we ran along I entertained discussion about a number of topics: school, sports, his interests, etc. Noticing the pace I was setting was not very difficult for Harley, I decided to pick up speed. Again, no visible signs of strain and Harley kept on talking. I increased the pace to a level I now was finding intense. I had stopped talking half a kilometre ago. Harley was striding along beside me effortlessly. When we finished the course and I caught my breath I said to Harley, “Have you ever thought about coming out for cross-country running?” He indicated he had chores after school each night and so could not attend practices unless they were at school. I agreed to find ways for him to practise if he would agree to come to the cross-country meet in mid October.

One of Harley’s training programs consisted of chasing down cows. Each night he had to round up cattle with the farm dog. Invariably some strayed or were contrary. Harley would run after the animals until they had been corralled or returned to the herd. It was classic interval training. It was apparent Harley loved to run. His distance pace was not much different from his sprint. His aerobic capacity was uncommon.

The cross-country meet was held at a conservation area near London. The course runs through wooded areas with some steep hills and winding territory, among evergreens and a stream. As the competitors and their entourage arrived both Harley and I looked out of place. As a rookie teacher from one of those country schools I had no credibility. Harley didn’t have the track suit to ceremoniously remove in preparation for the start. Also he could not sport the school colours. His uniform was again the buttoned up shirt, long pants, and now well-worn Converse runners. What is a kid in street clothes doing among the prestige athletes? My advice to Harley was simple, “Stay close to the leaders, don’t let them squeeze...
you back in the pack. After you reach the half-way point listen to how you feel and let your body tell you whether to speed up or hang on, but most of all enjoy the run.

The gun sounded and the runners headed off in a pack. The coaches then readied the chute for their return. The chute funnelled the runners through to the finish so we could tabulate the results in some coherent fashion. Nervously we all paced the finish area. Suddenly one of the field marshals signalled that the first group of runners was approaching the top of the hill that overlooked the route to the finish. Although we could not distinguish who the runners were, we could without a doubt distinguish their colours and the school they represented. One of the coaches turned to his colleagues and shouted, "It's some kid in street clothes out front."

Now it was my turn to squirm my way through to the front of the line to scream and wave, "Come on Harley, RUN, RUN!!" As he entered the chute, I could tell he had had the time of his life. He said he tried to talk to some people during the race but nobody would talk back so he kept moving ahead to the next person. Finally when there was nobody left he said he just let go and started to run his best. I was so proud of him.

Harley taught me a lot about teaching and coaching. It's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game. It's not just how you play the game strategically but how you enjoy the game—how you love being involved in this moment of peak experience, how you experience the joy of movement and the flow and fluidity of mind, body and soul. Unless as teachers we take the time to run alongside our students, listening to them with our eyes and ears, heads and hearts, we may never get to know them and the important possibilities in their lives.

Andy Anderson taught elementary physical and health education and core subjects in Perth County for 12 years. During that time he was also the Board's physical and health education consultant. Before coming to OISE/UT Andy taught Physical and Health Education at the University of Western Ontario for eight years. Andy has been at OISE/UT for the last six years and is currently working with the Heart and Stroke Foundation to promote physical activity and wellness in schools. He is a professor in OISE/UT's Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Department.