

THE RACE THAT THREE GIRLS WON

CHIP DENTON

This is a true story about two schools and three girls who gave their best.

On Tuesday, September 24, Trinity's Cross Country team traveled down the road to Duke Middle School for a three-way meet, the first of our season. Cross country teams need a minimum of five runners to finish in order to score as a team, and our girls were one shy of the five. At the last minute, the team recruited a fifth girl, Mary Mac, to run. This sixth grader had practiced with the team some, but because of her club soccer team, had decided not to compete.

One of my favorite things is to sidle up inconspicuously to the huddle and listen in as Coach West gets the athletes ready to run. Down on their level, eye to eye, with the intensity of a preacher, he said to them, "What I'm asking for is your best. You give that and no one can ask for more." And then, as is his custom, he led them in a prayer.

The Duke School track circles three times through the woods, so that all the moms and dads stand around for several minutes after the start not knowing who is in front. When the girls came out of the woods, there were two Trinity girls out in front. One was the novice, the sixth grader, running stride for stride with Taylor, last year's front runner. I remember saying to someone nearby, "Mary Mac has gone out too fast. She'll never keep up." The second time they emerged from the woods, still the two were running strong, in front with a Duke School runner, Emily, close behind. Imagine our surprise and puzzlement when, three minutes later, Mary Mac emerged from the woods in the lead, with the Duke School girl in pursuit, and Taylor nowhere in sight. The girls took one final lap around the soccer field and Mary Mac finished first. That victory, for a sixth grader, was itself a tale, but soon I learned that it was only half the story, and maybe not even the best part of it.

When two other Duke School runners emerged from the woods, they shouted that a runner was down and needed help. Coach West ran down the trail to find Taylor. I saw him, minutes later, coming out of the woods, carrying Taylor, whose knee was banged up pretty badly.

It was actually a couple of days before I heard the full story. Taylor, in the lead, had twisted her knee and fallen. Emily, the Duke School runner, stopped to help, and so did our own Mary Mac. Emily, obviously concerned about her opponent, looked to Mary Mac and said, "You got her?"

Mary Mac assured her she did and Emily ran on. Then Taylor, looking up through tears and pain, said to Mary Mac, "Go! Finish!"

So Mary Mac took off through the woods to the finish line and Taylor lay motioning all the runners on past her until help came.

Three girls won that race. The one who fell, who swallowed her disappointment, pain, and fear and told the others to go on. The one on the other team, who gave up seconds and a sure advantage to show compassion on a worthy opponent. And the one who gave up her lead for the sake of her teammate, and then found the kick to overtake the lead again.

Non nobis, domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam. Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory. First place goes to the one who has learned that she is third: God first, then neighbor, then self. There is truth and goodness and beauty in that order. This is an eternal glory which no Nietzschean, trash-talking superstar can ever reflect. This is the pattern of the One who ran the race and finished, who stopped to pick us up and carry us along, who was, simply, the Best There Ever Was.