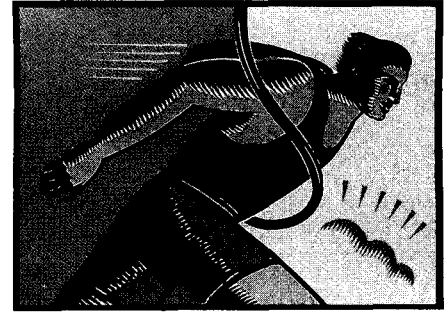


# Transcript

WORDS WORTH REPEATING



## "TOO MANY KIDS TODAY ARE SOFT"

*Condensed from an essay by Jim Vermeulen—an upstate New York teacher and coach—printed in the Syracuse Post-Standard, 2/22/2000.*

As my high school track and cross-country coaching seasons accumulate, so too, unfortunately, do my number of "lost runners."

These are kids who will never know how good they could have been as competitors, because they didn't stick it out long enough or never trained hard enough to realize their potential. Each year, more of them make my long Who-Might-Have-Been list.

Some of them quit running after the first sweltering days of late-summer practices. Others quietly disappeared amid the cold March rains. Some took their leave, amazingly, with only weeks remaining in a winter schedule. Others stuck out a season of running the long miles but never returned the following year.

They said they were injured. They said they were too busy with other commitments. They said they were told by family, doctors, or friends not to punish themselves. They said running was just no fun.

In truth, I've come to believe, most of them just found the sport's demands too stiff. The challenge of "doing something hard" has grown less and less attractive to kids today.

We have taught children the value of ease over effort. Kickin' back, hanging out, and chillin' are now considered purposeful activities. This is a society where parents drive their kids 400 yards to school. Our cultural preoccupation with ease is intense, despite Nike ads to the contrary.

Kids have also been taught to value participation over performance. Once, performing well in a sport was the goal of most athletics, and disciplined practice

was the means. Now, for many, *participating* is the ultimate aim.

In track, we say there is a difference between running a race and racing. One requires Woody Allen's directive: just showing up. The other means you have sweated and sacrificed to be in a position to give it your all in a few moments of excellence. What is too often lost today is the invaluable experience of attempting something "in depth," where commitment, discipline, and sacrifice are required.

Some of my lost runners were disappointed to learn that our sport was not all adrenaline rushes and flowing along "free as the wind." They discovered running could be hard—just plain hard—and that it didn't always feel good.

We have twisted the relationship between "feeling good" and performing. Where the gradual acquisition of skills and the mastery of a sport's fundamentals once provided a sense of accomplishment that allowed athletes to feel good about themselves, now we seem to think that athletics must *start* with good feelings.

In this weird reversal, kids must be "having fun" in order to learn a game, and stick with it. A coach's demands or criticisms supposedly destroy an athlete's "interest," or damage his or her fragile "self-esteem," and therefore must be muted.

Too many parents want their kids to excel without any pain or failure. Coaches who demand high levels of discipline and dedication from their athletes are frequently criticized for asking too much. Often, their only defense is a winning program.

Many people believe that today's athletes are superior to any previous, by dint of improved training and better sports technology. You can't, however, make that case with schoolboy runners.

In the sport of running, the clock is coldly objective. In a commentary a cou-

ple years ago, Marc Bloom, editor of the cross-country magazine *Harrier*, compared different generations of schoolboy distance runners, and offered these facts:

- Only three high school boys have ever broken 4:00 in the mile. The first was Jim Ryun in 1965. The last was Marty Liquori in 1967.

- Of the 30 fastest boys' two-mile performances, none have come in the last decade.

- Legendary American middle-distance runner Steve Prefontaine ran an 8:41.5 record two-mile in 1969. Only two runners have since exceeded that, both in the 1970s.

Bloom went on to suggest that various social circumstances (family breakdown, mass media enticements, etc.) now compete with, or dilute, young runners' commitments to their sport.

Ed Bowes, cross-country coach at Bishop Loughlin High School in Brooklyn and organizer of the Manhattan Invitational XC Meet, is more blunt. Noting the dwindling number of runners competing at a high level, he says simply: "Too many kids today are soft."

My own experience with lost runners tells me that many kids do not now appreciate what it means to struggle at an endeavor, to put their head down and, with the encouraging support of parents, relatives, and friends, achieve something meaningful.

I'm afraid my lost runners may never learn The Secret. The Secret can never be taught, but only "discovered" by the athlete willing to make sacrifices and take chances. The Secret is this: There is inner pride, quiet joy, and personal victory in any struggle. A corny, old-fashioned concept perhaps, but one that has always produced champions. And not just ones who stand on winners' podiums.

# In Real Life

## FIRST-PERSON AMERICA



### SOFTBALL AT 60

By Edward Ericson

I know how it happened, but not why. A friend asked me if I'd like to play in a softball league for men age 55 and up.

Why did I submit to an offer that struck me from the start as ridiculous? Didn't I know my other friends would whoop with glee over the incongruity of a lame man nearly 60 returning to the game of his youth?

Having played up to 200 games a year in the long seasons of Southern California, hadn't I already overdosed on softball? Having lost my ability to run two decades ago by so severely breaking a leg once paralyzed by childhood polio that it took six operations and a bone graft to avoid amputation, hadn't I heard the clear celestial command to a sedentary life?

To play softball at all, old men need the rules modified. The legs go first; so this softball is slow pitch and slower running. A hitter need only hobble to first, and then he can get a substitute runner. So a team needs only two guys who can run, if they are placed several spots apart in the batting order.

In our league, much thought has gone into protecting the lower extremities. Attached to first base is a second bag (orange for the visually impaired) so that there will be one base apiece for fielder and runner, and no collisions. In addition, one may overrun any base; brief excursions beyond second into short left-center field are routine. Another anti-collision rule forbids tagging of runners; you must tag the base instead. And at home, a runner is out if he steps on the plate, safe if he crosses a line parallel to it. These inviolable commandments of *Thou Shalt Not Tag* and *Thou Shalt Not Slide* have saved many a brittle joint.

Still, for those who fancy they can run, danger lurks. Short of inventing a

speed governor for legs, pulled muscles cannot be avoided. Our team lost its best athlete this way. The result is what might be called survival of the unfittest.

In the field, our teams have not nine (as in baseball), not ten (as in softball), but 11 players. With the four outfielders arrayed like a picket fence not very far beyond the five infield pickets, a newcomer to the batter's box may experience claustrophobia. Not to worry; the fielders approximate statues. A high pop fly that lands ten steps from where a player was positioned will inevitably touch down two steps out of his reach.

Ground balls need not traverse between infielders to get through. Though no rule forbids bending over or even putting one's knee to the ground, the air between a fielder's legs regularly accommodates many a softball. The other night, five straight ground balls by the other team found these gaping passageways between our ankles.

Did I forget to mention "senior moments"? Men who have played ball for more than half a century transgress against the infield-fly rule. Throws go to wrong bases. Pitchers who once backed up bases by instinct now stand stationary on the mound, with either forgetfulness or energy drain the explaining factor. The batter's box sometimes awaits occupation until one player reminds another that it's his turn—*who me?*—to bat.

I've been rooting for zero spectators ever since an emeritated campus colleague spotted me with glove in hand some time ago. "What? Not you!" he nearly shouted. "What do you think you're doing?" I felt as if he had caught me in a red-light district; my small consolation was that he apparently had once thought me a sensible fellow. How could I explain that every time I head out to a game, I feel more dread than exhilaration, and yet that on

every drive home I end up replaying my line-drive perfectly placed between third and short, and the low throw I dug out at first—dim shadows of my youthful skills?

My ever-cheery mother once sighed, between dialysis treatments, "Son, it's no fun to grow old." Now I've discovered myself that aging well is hard to do. But somewhere between the ridiculous denial of a senior facelift and the real danger of just giving up on life, old-age softball is perhaps a happy medium. It's not a forceful rejection of nature, merely a gentle resistance against the gathering night. The vain attempts of my teammates and me to fend off mortality with softball is a softly murmured *yes* to the call of Tennyson's Ulysses for old men to join in one final adventure. Its residual nobility repels the euphemisms of "senior citizen" and "golden-ager."

Only after games do I reflect upon the side benefits. Male bonding is a need that does not disappear with age. Cares, duties, fears all vanish from the mind for one absorbing hour. Delicious languor after exertion arrives in the best way—as a byproduct, not a direct goal. And I think my teammates would say they were having fun (did I mention we haven't won a game?).

After a few games, my friend asked me if I was enjoying myself. I said I hadn't yet decided. But I think I lied.

Now I'm wondering if I will be asked to play next year. And I wonder what I will say.

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