

Born to run

It is like something out of a dream. A stadium full of people chanting his name, "Col-lin! Col-lin!" as he weaves his way around the track, through the field, up the hill and back. Five years old, but hanging with the fourth graders in this, his first, $\frac{3}{4}$ mile race. The one question on everyone's mind, "Can he do it?"

Flash forward to the day before. A conversation on the walk home from school.

"Collin, you're going to after care tomorrow."

"Where are you going to be?"

"I'm going to a race."

"You're running?"

"Not this time. A couple of the boys from running club are running in a race. It's at Bob-Bob's high school, where Becky works, Archbishop Curley."

"I want to go."

"You're too little. Maybe when you get a little older."

"I can do it," he said. "Watch!"

He ran the $\frac{1}{8}$ of a mile ahead of us to our front door.

"See! I told you! I can do it!"

"It's further than that," I told him. "It's like running to the bowling alley." He was used to our Tuesday excursions to Bowling Club.

But, he normally ended up hitching a ride on my stroller.

"Aww, please!" he insisted.

"Let me think about it," I said.

I reread the flyer for the Archbishop Curley Cross Country Classic. The youngest age group was 4th grade and under. The distance was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. I imagined one of my kindergarten students' parents approaching me and asking me if his or her son or daughter could participate. Based on the information before me, I'd say they qualified. And so did Collin.

"You can go," I told him. "But you have to run. You can't stop. You have to keep going."

"Okay," he said.

Before I knew it, I was writing his name on a paper bib (number 61) and pinning it to his navy blue St. Joan of Arc Sweatshirt. I surveyed the crowd. He was the littlest kid there. Everyone else seemed to be noticing, too. I overheard their whispers as we walked by, "How old is that kid?" I struggle with a severe "Imposter Complex," so I began to wonder if I was making a huge mistake.

By chance, Patrick was working on one of Curley's athletic fields, so he made arrangements to spectate, as did my dad, who is a dutiful Curley alum, and Collin's

godmother, Becky, who teaches Spanish there. We watched each heat take off from the track, break through the fence, dominate a monster of a hill, tear through the top tier of the stadium, and round back down the hill into the home stretch of the track. The oldest students did it twice, while the younger groups fought their way around once.

Once. That's all it would take for Collin to finish the race. As he bounced up and down cheering on our two runners, I imagined him stumbling up the hill, falling to the ground in tears until I came to rescue him. I pictured him veering off of course. I saw a vision of Collin quitting before he even made his way through the fence. My students, on the other hand, finished strong and made me proud.

When it was time for the fourth grade and under boys to line up, we barely made it to the track on time. As soon as Collin set his toe on the line, the gun went off, and so did he.

He fell behind just as soon as he started; his short, little 5-year-old legs no match for the brawn of the seasoned 9-year-old athletes. Patrick and I followed him on the ground, all the way to the fence, where a Curley student acting as a course marshal decided to abandon his post (Collin was, after all, the very last runner) and join Collin for his adventure. I looked at his face and thought I saw him crying. He smiled and waved.

Patrick and I stood at the base of the hill, our hearts pounding, watching in anxious anticipation as he ran toward the sky. We cheered him along, yelling out his name. Suddenly, a man with a radio voice joined us. "And coming up the hill right now is Collin Barberry, a kindergartener from St. Joan of Arc, and the youngest runner to ever compete in the Curley Classic. Let's cheer him on!"

The fourth graders were finishing in bursts as Collin reached the top of the bowl. A line of spectators formed above the top row of the stadium, reaching down to give Collin "high-5"s. He tagged every single one, back-tracking if he needed to.

He kept up with his running partner all the way back down the hill and powered through his final stretch. The crowd went wild as the little blond-haired boy in the rumpled navy blue sweat suit crossed the finish line.

I ran over to him. He was panting, his face crimson. His hair had taken on the form of a stormy sea, wet, wild, and wavy. He looked like a grown man for a minute. Then, I saw that his shoe was untied and remembered that he was so little that he didn't even know how to tie it. "I'm sorry I doubted you," I told him as I turned his royal blue laces into bunny ears.



Patrick, my Dad, Becky and I swarmed him with hugs and forced him into a million photo ops. A lovely young lady, Caroline Kogler, approached us and offered Collin

some Powerade and candy (Father Matt tried to steal some of Collin's Skittles!) and told us that Collin would be receiving a medal.

"Look, Mom! I earned a medal!" he said, proudly raising the bronze coin on the red, white, and blue ribbon around his neck. It didn't matter that he was the last runner to finish. What mattered was that he did finish, even though no one expected him to. Not even me.

Collin opened himself to the possibility of success. And everything else fell into place. I'm so grateful for that young man who ran beside Collin like a guardian angel. I thank Ms. Kogler for formally recognizing Collin. That's not why we came, but it made his first race extra special for him. I'm honored to have been a part of the Archbishop Curley Cross Country Classic, and thank Mr. Gene Hoffman for giving Collin the opportunity to participate in this outstanding event.

Above all, thanks be to God for giving Collin strength of body, mind, spirit, and will to complete such a challenging feat. I learned more about my son in those 12 minutes than I have since the day he was born.