

[Jeff Bailey was one of the top high school distance runners in suburban Chicago, and life was good. As his senior year approached, Jeff had great expectations—training with his running buddies, setting PR's, and racing in the State Championships in cross country and track. But things don't always go according to plan.]

The Brotherhood

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Jeff Bailey is in the middle of a hard run, but he's thinking about next week. That's when he leaves for the distance camp in Michigan, the highlight of his summer running. Camping out, training twice a day, beach runs on the dunes, speedwork on the trails—what could be more fun? And best of all, hanging out with your teammates, your running buddies.

Jeff has run with most of the guys for years, since junior high. It's a close-knit group. Something happens when you put in so many miles together on the roads. The shared pain creates bonds. You've seen each other at your best and your worst. You do crazy stuff like jump fences and sprint across private property, or run in the hottest part of the hottest day, just for toughness. To stir things up, you race without shirts in a big pack through the center of town, flying past startled pedestrians. You crack each other up; you talk in shorthand. The group has a favorite line, "Don't waste a heartbeat." Outsiders don't get it. Doesn't matter—they don't get runners anyway.

Jeff is the captain and best runner on his high school team. He stands 6'2", has an easy smile and hair that comes down to his collar. He's just come off a successful track season, run his personal best in the two mile, and despite missing the qualifying time for the state track meet by one second, he knows that next year, his senior year, will be his best season ever.

Before he leaves for camp, Jeff has a few last errands. One is the annual pre-season physical required by his school. The drill for guys is always the same. The doctor says—Pull down your pants, let me feel you, turn your head, cough. Except this time the doctor tells Jeff—You know, one testicle looks swollen. We better have a urologist take a look. Right away.

So Jeff and his mother Jo go to the urologist, who takes one look at him and says—You have testicular cancer. We have to operate right away. The walls close in, Jeff's thoughts are swirling. What about the running camp? What about my summer of running with my buddies? How soon can I run again?

Two days later a testicle is removed. The tumor is examined to see what kind of cancer cells it contains. He is told there is a 50-50 chance the cancer will return.

It's not long before Jeff is running again, and soon he's feeling like his old self except for the cloud of anxiety that rolls in each time he has a blood test. In the fall cross country

season Jeff's times get faster and faster, but again he narrowly misses qualifying for the state meet. By now he has some perspective on life's frustrations, though the failure doesn't hurt any less, and he's not sure he wants it to.

To his running buddies, Jeff's not a cancer victim, he's just Jeff. He's just one of the guys they hang out with and talk about girls and movies and running. They normalize his life when it's anything but normal.

In December there's a temporary scare when he has one bad blood test, but then the tests return to normal. The roller coaster ride, living from test to test, drains his energy, but his spring track season is impressive, and by mid-April he runs 9:42 for the two mile, virtually all alone. Qualifying for the state track meet now seems like a lock.

Jeff gets his next blood test the following week, and the tumor marker has doubled. "You need to start treatment," the doctor says, meaning chemo, meaning his season is through.

Jeff runs his final high school race the following weekend, anchoring a four-mile relay. As he races, his teammates line the track, cheering wildly for him. The word passes, and now runners from other teams are lining the track too, jumping up and down, just going nuts. The memories of that race will help him handle what he faces next.

Jeff starts treatment—three 3-week cycles. In the first part of the cycle he sits each day for five days, six hours a day, while bags of chemicals drip into his body. Six hours is a long time to sit and think. He prays a lot, and some of his prayers are pretty angry.

During the first week in the cycle, the doctors let Jeff run a little because they know it will help his morale. His high school coach asks him to continue to lead the team in stretching. "You're still the captain," he tells Jeff. "They need your leadership." In the second week of the cycle the full effect of the chemo hits. Jeff is sick to his stomach all the time and wrung out with exhaustion. He watches his running buddies, experiencing the end of the season vicariously through them.

But now Jeff has a new worry, and it is consuming. His hair is falling out. He is 18 and prom is in one week and he wants to look great and there'll be photos. Every morning he looks at his pillow, and he sees more hair. He's afraid to wash his hair for fear of more of it falling out. He cuts it shorter to make it look presentable. It's a race to the finish line, but by God, his hair hangs in there through prom night. The following day it comes out in huge clumps.

Jeff decides it's time for all of his hair to go. Jo grabs an electric shaver, and they go to the bathroom to cut it off. Jeff turns on a rock song that he listens to before races. When Jo finishes cutting his hair, he looks at himself in the mirror. Taken aback, he quickly puts on a bandana.

Now the doorbell is ringing, which is weird because it's 10 PM, and what could someone want? Jeff opens the door, and there they are, the guys. His running mates are standing there on the front porch laughing sheepishly and shoving each other through the door, all twelve of them, pointing at each other and laughing at their very shaved heads.

Their noise fills the Bailey home. "Check it out, Jeff," one guy is rubbing his bald head. "Smooth as a baby's bottom!" They take a group photo. They tell about the reluctant teammate they had to tackle before he'd cut his hair. And how their graduation caps no longer fit. They tell stories about their crazy runs that season, stories that Jeff and his buddies still tell each other years later. They talk about their last summer together before college. And tomorrow's workout.

And as they leave that night, they tell each other their line, their valediction, "Don't waste a heartbeat."