

## Brother Roland's Advice

Grant Charles nervously approached Brother Roland in the equipment room. He carried a small bundle which included blue shorts, an antiquated yellow jersey and a pair of track shoes. The items were hand-me-downs from a junior varsity basketball team from many years before. They were faded and always seemed out of place in meets.

“Well Mr. Charles what can I do for you this early morning?”

“I’ve, ahh, come to turn in my uniform. I am going to devote more time to studying and I have three ladies’ lawns that I take care of.” Grant said.

“What, leaving us? To study more? I’ve heard that one a time or two. But, you know, it’s never quite resonates. It occurs to me, no offense, that boys that come up with that excuse are giving up on themselves. And I don’t like to see that in a young person.”

“Brother Roland, this is my junior year. I have accomplished nothing. I have never won a meet. I also did both sophomore and junior seasons at cross country and, same thing. It’s unreal painful work, somedays my legs are killing me, and I really believe, in my case, it’s not worth it.”

“Should I, then too quit? After all Coach McAdoo is the varsity coach. I am the virtually unheralded junior varsity coach. And, as you note about yourself, not someone that wins much,” said Brother Roland.

“Oh, no. Everyone really likes you, respects you. That would be a real bummer.”

“But I get no recognition, most of the years they even forget to list me in the yearbook as assistant track coach. Gee, how’d you like that? A fifty-one year old Holy Cross Brother, that no one ever knows has anything to do with athletics. Bummer right back.”

“Brother, you teach civics and economics, everyone loves your classes. I mean, you really matter.”

“I probably give too many A’s and B’s. I suppose you’re right about that. Students seem to like educators that are higher graders. I guess that’s another weakness on my part too. But, back to you. *You* don’t matter?”

“Well, not at track. I never win, when they lump us in with the varsity, to speed the meets up, I really don’t matter much.”

“Most of the boys *don’t win much*, have you noticed that? It’s all about realizing your potential, being your best, improving, so you can possibly score points for the team. But it’s also about being a good teammate, a member of something bigger than yourself, and striving always towards reaching what you can.

“Look how much you’ve improved. You’re a junior now, you started with us last year. All your times are significantly better. I *track*, pardon the pun, every one of you, and you have moved up as well as anyone. Plus, you were born in December, so as a junior when you’re competing with other juniors remember, the ones who seem to do the best, are usually nearly a year older than you. So, what’s the problem?”

Grant took a deep breath, “I don’t even have a real event, like the really good guys do. You keep moving me around, the 880, the 440, the mile, the two-mile, the 220.”

“And you’ve gotten much better at them all. Maybe you’ll end up as a decathalon, can you jump? Plus, I’ve always thought, guys never get bored moving around, and, you’re in more events each meet than the *really good guys*. Not standing around as much in the cold like you boys hate, like we all hate!”

“Brother, the practices are killers. They take so much exertion and in March and April, and like you just mentioned *only worse*, it’s so cold and windy, the rain, sleet, it’s really hard with so few really nice days. And takes it takes up a ton of energy to run that, that *all out* every single day.”

“Sounds, like we’re doing something right. Look at this, the first time we timed you at the 880, you ran a 2:55, now you’re at 2:21. Wow.”

“Well, that’s maybe good enough for middle of the pack to almost last, even at the JV meets. I mean, don’t you think I could benefit more from extra study time? Plus, I am working. We’re not rich, I have to clean the stands on Saturdays after every football game at CYO Field, with four other guys to work off half my tuition.”

“Well, Grant, we all need extra study time, extra prayer time and work builds character, but we need balance in our lives too. If we have a penchant for something, something that we’re basically quite good at and will improve our life by the arduous act of pursuing it properly, we need that too. Is that not important?”

“Brother, I don’t feel like I have much of what Coach McAdoo calls, ‘talent.’

“Forgive me, as an economics teacher, one of my obsessions, is demographics. And, I feverishly keep my own homemade stats. I don’t want to bore you, but let’s consider your times in all of those events you’ve jumped around in the past two years. There is little doubt in my mind, that you would be able to beat over 95% of the student body of this very large school in any of them. Grant, there are nearly one-thousand boys in this place. Nineteen out of every twenty do not have the ‘talent’ you do. If there are many kids in this vast city that have faster times, I still bet that overall statistic would hold. You’ve probably not thought about the fact that if you lived in a smaller city or rural town, attending perhaps a country school and competing

against other tiny schools, you'd be varsity and likely even winning meets. And you don't even know yet, how good you can be. Now, in my book you have something to be proud of, something to treasure and improve upon. Don't just throw that away."

Grant shook his head. He tried to speak, but Brother Roland quashed it.

"Do me a favor, Grant. Think about it for twenty-four hours. Take the day off from practice if you want, or, even better, show up. But one more day, I don't think it is an asset you want to toss, especially if you have not examined all the variables. Don't forget that you're setting up work habits, gut level commitments and super-healthy exercises that will benefit you for the rest of your life, and many times in unexpected ways."

Later in the day, during an unusually hard practice, Grant ran, among other things eight 220-yard ten-man-heats, in which he did quite well. As the teammates were scattering to go home, one of the standouts, Mickey Deitz, clapped Grant on the back. "Man, you were smoking today!"

Mickey was the third varsity guy to congratulate him which had never happened, and given that Grant had not finished first in any of the runs—though he had seven finishes in the top three—he had to wonder if Brother Roland had not put the 'real runners' as Grant thought of them, up to it.

The next day at practice Brother Roland put his arm around Grant and simply said, "Thank you." That was it, neither Brother Roland nor Grant ever said another word afterwards concerning quitting. "How do I say no, after that?" he had wondered. "Damn, the guy is too much of a salesman for me."

Graduation, June 6, 1966.

Brother Roland cornered Grant and shook his hand. “Well, you did it. You stuck it out and we’re all the better for it. Congratulations. I hope you are happy about how much you improved. Quite an accomplishment for one nearly a year younger and perhaps lacking the lung capacity and musculature of many of the guys. What are you, nearly six feet and what one hundred thirty-five pounds?”

“Well, thank you, Brother. I guess I am glad I stuck it out. Though I never scored enough points to get a varsity letter.”

“Listen to me, this place is hard. It is parochial prep school. There are more boys here than all but three of the twenty-four high schools in the area. You ended up with freshman numerals, and four, counting cross country, junior varsity letters. That is something! They have, to my knowledge, never made exceptions for the granting of awards. Grades are grades, rules are rules, standards are standards. Most appreciate that, in time.”

“I’m not complaining—”

“Let me finish. The high school from which you just graduated sends 96% of its student to college and ninety percent of those graduate. We are a little like Notre Dame, a little like West Point, and a little like an Ivy League school. Everything you did here makes you special. Don’t ever forget that.”

Over the summer it became obvious that Grant would not be one of those that went to college that fall. He lacked funds and had a tough time with his father who had been psychologically impaired in World War II and dealt with extreme anger issues. It made life at home or even in town a nightmare for Grant. With a friend, they determined since there was a draft, that they would enlist, volunteer for an extra year in the army, and with that move, earn the

privilege of picking a job other than the infantry and likely, as the recruiting sergeant assured them, most probably, stay out of Vietnam. Then, they would have the GI Bill and be able to attend a university in the Fall of 1969.

October, 1966, Basic Training, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri

Staff Sergeant Willie Parks, a vicious-appearing drill instructor, and Grant's platoon sergeant zeroed in on Grant during the vital Physical Proficiency Test. Given at the end of week three, those who failed it might be sent back to another basic company to start all over, week one, day one, a fate anyone would dread.

"Well, soldier, if I can call you that, you're in quite a bind. You have really fallen on your ass and disappointed me. You did somewhat okay in practices, but now you have choked. I think you're mocking me. I think you're challenging me! Eighteen parallel bars, dog crap, seventy-six is the perfect score, you get twenty points for eighteen, so that's an F! Grenade toss? That's a gimme. Seven dummy grenades thrown into rings twenty-five yards away, you scored a forty on that! What the hell! Run-dodge-and-jump, you got a sixty, that's what fat pigs get. What is your damn problem? Because it's raining you go fetal like a little girl?

"No sergeant. I—"

"Don't give me that, what do you say about this cowardly, weakling performance?"

"No excuse, sergeant!"

"That better. No excuse! You're a bolo, a clown, I knew it the first time I laid eyes on you. Skin and bone. Your bunk looks like your still in it. You can't give me thirty decent push-ups. And you got all that extra time for prepping your gear in the dawn pre-chow, because you don't even shave yet. No going on to week eight with us, it's week one for you if you screw this

up. The mile-run. The epitome of stamina, weak men hobble and walk where the strong run. I got you pegged with Porky Pig over there, as the ultimate contest, who will finish last and who will finish second to last.”

Just then the company commander, First Lieutenant Larry W. Mumford, bellowed through a bullhorn.

“This is the last heat of the mile run, the last twenty maggots, to take their turn. God help any of you if you fall out. I will personally kick your ass and have the MP’s take you back to reception, where you will be assigned to another company just starting. So far, I have seen some shitty performances in this event, but no one, not any of the roughly one-hundred-eighty before you, have fallen out. BUT some got a zero for their horribly, cowardly times, one slob took over ten minutes. You need to know I will not stand for weakness. If you are weak and cowardly, you will get your brothers killed in Vietnam. You better think about becoming a man.”

Sergeant Parks turned into Grant’s face, only an inch away. “You got that, Private?”

“May I say something,” Grant shockingly said.

The sergeant, squinting moved to within a wisp of Grant’s nose. “Yeah, mouse-boy. Say something.”

“I hurt my shoulder during the pugil stick matches.”

“You mean when Sachowitz, hit you with a baseball swing and you went down? So what?”

“Well, I fell on my shoulder. During practices I could do 38 bars, I threw the grenades in practice, even made them spiral and I thought I could get a perfect score, but today my shoulder was throbbing, because, mainly, I slipped in the run dodge and jump and fell on it, slipped in the rain, cost me three seconds, and probably forty or fifty points.” Grant said.

“You know something, I don’t give a shit. My platoon, is not doing well because of cub scouts. I have to take crap from the other four platoon sergeants because of girlees like you.”

Grant gave up and said dejectedly, “Yes, sergeant.”

“Two rows of ten, Lt Mumford yelled. Let’s put Porky Pig and Private Charles in the choice spots, first row, first two inside positions. Porky, you can take the rail.”

Because the other events finished, and this was the last heat of day, the entire company was scattered around to witness the race.

First Sergeant Bill Ayers, after assuring the runners their lives depended on it, held the starter gun over his head and fired. The runners shot forward. There was a bit of a scramble which Grant skillfully avoided, he picked out a couple of guys he planned to draft and sure enough with their over-anxiety, they got an early lead, but Grant was right on their heels. At the end of the first quarter mile, Grant was in second place behind the obvious strongest athlete. It was Sachowitz. But just behind Grant were a pack of eight who were in easy positions to overtake the lead.

“Whoa Charles,” yelled Sergeant Parks, “You dumbass, it’s not a one lap event!”

The other DI’s and many of witnessing troops laughed. This shocked Grant and angered him, ‘they think I don’t know how many laps are in a mile? They think THAT about me!’ His strides lengthened, then he muttered ‘this is no kind of a pace. Sachowitz is a bouncing sloth.’

As they turned onto the backstretch Grant suddenly swung over to lane two and pulled even to the gifted footballer who was badly panting but holding on. Grant said, “Hey, Sachoschitz, no pugil sticks today so you can’t cheat. Don’t worry though, if I have to wait twenty minutes for you at the finish line, I won’t let them leave without you. So don’t give up.”

“What the hell?” Sachowitz gasped.



Grant increased his effort and glided away. By the next turn, he had a fifteen-yard lead.

Adrenaline surged into Grant as never before. He had seen himself on tape twice and he wished he was being filmed now. He felt powerful, in control, and gloriously sadistic.

On the backstretch of lap three, he began lapping other soldiers, one, two, six, eight, ten. At the start of the fourth lap, Sergeant Parks yelled, "What the hell's got into you boy. You're doin' it! By God, you're doing it!"

As he stormed the backstretch for the last time, he felt so incredible, he almost wished the race were longer, he was, for once, enjoying the brutal pain of such an all-out run. Into the last turn he sprinted with all his might.

Though three soldiers passed Sachowitz no one gained ground on the leader, Grant won the heat by ninety yards. His time, with heavy combat boots, and soaked, long, fatigue pants was 5:09. Of the 205 participants, he had the fifth best time. No one, not even Grant himself, could believe it.

Sergeant Parks ran over and clamped Grant in a headlock. "You are my man, boy! Jesus, I have never been so stunned by a troop. You got the full one hundred points on that event which puts you at three-sixty despite your rather understandable efforts given your injured shoulder on the others. I'm tellin' the company clerk to excuse you from any extra duties going forward, no KP, no base-labor duty, no yard work, no fire watch, no shit!"

"Thanks, Sergeant. I had a feeling I'd do okay."

"Okay? Okay?! You were unbelievable. The first-place guy, Private Eugene Morganteau, in third platoon, ran track for Kansas State and his time was five flat. Conditions were hell today. I am sure you'd have run under five on a nice day. Did you run track or something on me, boy?"

“Yes Sergeant and three seasons of cross country.”

“Don’t that beat all! You must’ve been a star.”

“Well, not exactly.” he smirked, but decided not to give any more details and take in the full credit.

It was more than a relief, Grant felt as though he were on top of the world. Sachowitz came up and shook his hand. “*Damn.*” was all he said.

That evening Grant started a letter:

Dear Brother Roland,

The first great benefit from my competitive running years came today and I have to say, I will never be able to thank you enough.