

Worth the Wait

by Rick Reilly



WHY DO they come? Why do they hang around to watch the slowest high school cross-country runner in America? Why do they want to see a kid finish the 3.1 miles in 51 minutes when the winner did it in 16?

Why do they cry? Why do they nearly break their wrists applauding a junior who falls flat on

his face almost every race? Why do they hug a teenager who could be beaten by any other kid running backward?

Why do they do it? Why do all of his teammates go back out on the course and run the last 10 minutes of every race with him? Why do other teams do it too? And the girls' teams? Why run all the way back out there to pace a kid running like a tortoise with bunions?

Why?

Because Ben Comen never quits.

See, Ben has a heart just slightly larger than the Chicago Hyatt. He also has cerebral palsy. The disease doesn't mess with his intellect—he gets A's and B's—but it seizes his muscles and contorts his body and gives him the balance of a Times Square drunk. Yet there he is, competing for the Hanna High cross-country team in Anderson, S.C., dragging that wracked body over rocks and fallen branches and ditches. And people ask, Why?

"Because I feel like I've been put here to set an example," says Ben, 16. "Anybody can find something they can do—and do it well. I like to show people that you can either stop trying or you can pick yourself up and keep going. It's just more fun to keep going."

It must be, because faced with what Ben faces, most of us would quit.

Imagine what it feels like for Ben to watch his perfectly healthy twin, Alex, or his younger brother, Chris, run like rabbits for Hanna High, while Ben runs like a man whacking through an Amazon thicket. Imagine never beating anybody to the finish line. Imagine dragging along that stubborn left side, pulling that unbending tire iron of a leg around to the front and pogo-sticking off it to get back to his right.

Worse, he lifts his feet so little that he trips on anything—a Twinkie-sized rock, a licorice-thick branch, the cracks between linoleum tiles. But he won't let anybody help him up. "It messes up my flow," he says. He's not embarrassed, just mad.

Worst, he falls hard. His brain can't send signals fast enough

for his arms to cushion his fall, so he often smacks his head or his face or his shoulder. Sometimes his mom, Joan, can't watch.

"I've been coaching cross-country for 31 years," says Hanna's Chuck Parker, "and I've never met anyone with the drive that Ben has. I don't think there's an inch of that kid I haven't had to bandage up."

But never before Ben finishes the race. Like Rocky Marciano, Ben finishes bloody and bruised, but never beaten. Oh, he always loses—Ben barely finishes ahead of the sunset, forget other runners. But he hasn't quit once. Through rain, wind or welt, he always crosses the finish line.

Lord, it's some sight when he gets there: Ben clunking his way home, shepherded by all those kids, while the cheerleaders screech and parents try to holler encouragement, only to find nothing coming out of their voice boxes.

The other day Ben was coming in with his huge army, Ben's

Friends, his face stoplight red and tortured, that laborious gait eating up the earth inch by inch, when he fell not 10 yards from the line. There was a gasp from the parents and a second of silence from the kids. But then Ben went through the 15-second process of getting his bloody knees under him, his balance back and his forward motion going again—and he finished. From the roar you'd have thought he just won Boston.

"Words can't describe that moment," says his mom. "I saw grown men just stand there and cry."

Ben can get to you that way. This is a kid who builds wheel-

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chair ramps for Easter Seals, spends nights helping at an assisted-living home, mans a drill for Habitat for Humanity, devotes hours to holding the hand of a disabled neighbor, Miss Jessie, and plans to run a marathon and become a doctor. Boy, the youth of today, huh?

Oh, one aside: Hanna High is also the home of a mentally challenged man known as Radio, who has been the football team's assistant for more than 30 years. Radio gained national attention in a 1996 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED story by Gary Smith and is the hero of a major movie that opens nationwide on Oct. 24.

Feel like you could use a little dose of humanity? Get yourself to Hanna. And while you're there, go out and join Ben's Friends. You'll be amazed what a little jog can do for your heart. □

If you have a comment for Rick Reilly, send it to reilly@sletters.com.