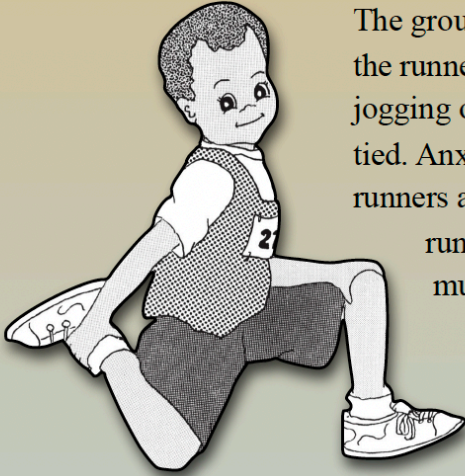


THE BIG RACE



The group milled nervously around the starting line. Each of the runners kept to himself, doing last minute stretches, jogging on the spot, or checking that his shoes were properly tied. Anxious parents glanced at the timers and back at the runners as they waited for the whistle that would call the runners to the starting line. For the moment no one had much to say.

Mark had worked hard for this race. Now he was alone with his thoughts. It was tough running cross country. The runs were always outdoors and that was fun, but the distances were long and the courses were challenging. There were always some difficult hills to climb. Sometimes it would have been easy to quit, to topple on the wood-chip trail during a practice and sprawl out on the grass for a rest. But Mark always pushed himself. He knew that quitting was not a choice for him. He had made up his mind to train hard, and that is what he did.

Mark's dad was eagerly waiting at the starting line. He was always there for Mark—always ready with an encouraging word. "There are rewards when it comes to hard work," he would say. "And the harder you work, the greater the rewards are. Yes, Son, you always reap what you sow. If you do a little work, you will get a little reward. But if you work hard, you will get a big reward. The training will pay off. You'll see."

Mark pulled his knee up toward his chin and felt the tug on his leg muscle as he prepared for the start of the biggest race of the season. He let the knee drop, and he glanced at the other runners as he lifted his other knee to his chest and pulled. A few of the boys were short and stocky, but most were lean and tall. Each runner wore a pair of shorts, and some had t-shirts that matched. A big, bold number was pinned to every chest.

The runners warmed up, loosening their muscles in readiness to begin. But as they walked, jogged, and stretched, they stole side glances at one another. Each runner was wondering the same thing: "How many of these guys can I beat?"