

# Coach's Edge – MUST READ

## Sam

My first teaching assignment was in a little town in northern Alberta. I was to be the physical education, math and health teacher in Smokey Creek Alberta. In my first class I noticed one student who was reading a science fiction novel rather than doing the assignment I had given to all the students. I was moving around the room seeing if anyone needed help. When I approached Sam he was reading his book and I politely said, "Son, you are not doing the assignment." He looked up at me over the cover of his book showing only his eyes. Before I could ask him what he was reading, the girl in front of him turned to me and said, "his name is Sam and he never does his work - he reads and that's it." The bell rang just then and the students left for their next class. When I asked the school counsellor about the boy, she quickly said, "That's just Sam. He hasn't done anything in class for years. He is adopted and has been ostracised since his foster parents moved here six or seven years ago."

I started to observe Sam. I had made it my mission not to let anyone be bullied by others while I was their teacher. In my observations I noticed when school was out classmates punched at Sam and chased him around. He offered no resistance and his only defence was to run away. He could really scamper! I guess if someone chased you daily you would be fast too! After school, on the way to the busses I went out and walked either slightly behind or very close to Sam so that I could stop the bullying. Every time he walked by someone they would automatically reach out and punch at him. He would duck or move away in anticipation. I would bring these people aside and warn them about the consequences of punching at others. They slowly started to quit this behaviour when I was around. Every time Sam came into my gym classes, he would sit on the stage and read; he never participated. Daily, I would talk to him saying things like, "what a nice play, eh Sammy." Or I would ask his opinion about the volleyball game - anything I could think of to try to engage him and let him know he was not invisible to me. Every time class ended I would always say, "See you next class Sam." Never once did he ever respond or even look at me.

Later that year, I was detained and couldn't walk out to the bus with the kids, but I could see them out the window. I witnessed a student who was a very good athlete chasing Sam in the field. I marvelled at how fast he was as the chaser never came close to catching the speedy and deceptive Sam. I would deal with the athletic student the next day.

Later in the year, as it approached time for track and field and because we didn't have runners in Sam's age group for the one hundred and two hundred meter runs, I entered Sam. When I informed him, he never



looked up from his book, as usual, and never acknowledging me. He did say as I was walking away, "I won't be there." I thought to myself, well at least I am making progress. He finally spoke to me!

On the day of the track meet, to my great surprise, Sam got on the athlete's bus. Everyone was talking and there was great anticipation and excitement, but a few noticed Sam had got on the bus. He had on Bermuda shorts and black soled shoes and an old ratty t – shirt. One student in the back quipped so everyone could hear; "I thought you had to come to 3 practices or you wouldn't be entered to run," knowing full well that Sam had never been to a practice. "That is right!" I said. "But we are making one exception." Sam was going, I thought to myself. In the excitement, they let it slide and nothing more was said. We were off to the meet in the next town. The host school were our rivals who because of their size always beat us. It was going to be a challenging day.

I lived right across from where the track meet was taking place about 29 kilometers from Smokey Creek. Once the bus stopped and the students were at the meet I ran home and picked up a pair of running shoes for Sam to run in. I still wondered if he would compete.

My responsibility at the track meet was to be a timer for the running events. When Sam's age group was called I looked down the track and he was standing upright while the other competitors were stretching and testing their blocks in anticipation of the run. He peered at his competitors as he stood there looking nonchalant and quite relaxed, almost bored. As the race grew closer, the runners adjusted their blocks and made sure they were strategically placed. They rehearsed a few times stretching out their legs and taking practice runs. Sam stood tall watching with a look of wonder on his face. When they were all ready, the gun sounded with Sam starting from an upright position. He took off clearly winning. His long legs barely touched the ground.



He ran effortlessly. I noticed some of his classmates in the stands and they gave a faint cheer, "yea Sam." I also noticed Sam stopped and listened. The two hundred meter run came up shortly afterwards and this time Sam kind off shook each leg watching the other athletes prepare. He had a look of ... well here we go again on his face. He sailed to an easy victory. His long legs were in full flight as he easily won his second first place ribbon. This time the girls from his class, who had been extremely critical of him at school, came out of the stands and ran up to congratulate him. Sam never moved. He tensed, I think expecting the worse. It never came; they patted him enthusiastically, cheering loudly, "Yea Sam, yea Smokey Creek."

Sam wasn't done yet. To my amazement he lined up to run in the four hundred meters, a race he was not registered in. It was like a movie plot! Here is a guy who hadn't responded to anything all year and now he is creating quite a stir as he lines up for a race he is ineligible for. The rival school was having no part of his enthusiasm. There was a call from the race marshal

at the 400 meters starting blocks to the field marshal positioned at the finish line, saying he had a kid from Smokey Creek who was not registered and he was asking how to handle the situation. The lady at our table said immediately and without hesitation and quite snotty, “kick him off the track.” I stepped in and cut her off saying he is going to run and that is it! She abruptly turned to me with this officious tone and said he is ineligible and she is upholding the rules. I said if you only knew Sam’s situation we wouldn’t be having this conversation and you would be letting him run. She said, “you people in Smokey Creek never get the rules right. “

While we were trying to sort out the problem, the race began. Sam ran even faster than the last two races. He smoked them. He easily came in first; his long legs glided him to another first place finish from start to finish. Interestingly, he kind of set himself at the start of the race by bending lower in preparation.

A big investigation ensued and Sam was declared ineligible because I never registered him in the 400 meters that day. The physics teacher, who was the track marshal, let me know in a very tense tone our school was always circumventing the rules and she was not having any part of this charade. I kept protesting but to no avail. Sam was not given a ribbon. He blew the doors off everyone and deserved or needed that ribbon. By this time we had more students watching him win and they started cheering as he crossed the finish line. The whole school came running up to congratulate him. The head timer told him he was not going to get a ribbon. He ran to me and tugged at my shirt saying, “what is going on, do I get a ribbon or not?” He already had two ribbons dangling from his Bermuda shorts and you could sense his apprehension and disappointment at not adding to his collection. The crowd was milling around, still cheering and patting him on the back for his easy win.

Sam never got a ribbon that day, but he did get a ribbon of sort. When they refused to give him his due at the meet our school took it to mean our rivals were just out to get us. Just like always!

The following week we held a big rally to honour all our athletes. I called every one of our competitors up and spoke about each one and how proud we were of their efforts. I left Sam to last. I explained how the big host school was doing everything in their power to stop us from beating them. (We were in the hunt and made it close but they just had too many athletes competing for us to take the aggregate trophy.) They even went as far as taking a first place ribbon from one of our athlete’s. Sammy was then introduced to come forward and be presented with a first place ribbon we purchased at the local sporting store. The gym erupted and Sam was re- born. They cheered and called out his name happily sharing his success. He had one big grin on his face when he shook my hand and the principal came forward and she too shook his hand. It was a warm touching moment for all of us.

The following year Sam joined the volleyball team and became a valued blocker. He joined the peer support team, and year book committee. He played on the basketball team and was at every intramural activity, playing brilliantly. He also went on to achieve a seventy – three average and represented the zones in the hurdles, one hundred and two hundred metres. He must have been waiting for that one hint of acceptance and he made up for lost time. Our counsellor said, with a smile and a touch of sarcasm, “You have unleashed him on me.” She looked after all the extracurricular events that were not athletics and she too was excited for Sam. He became a valued member of all the school teams as he was fast and growing taller each year. He had these long arms that were very useful for blocking and shooting baskets, and he could run. No more did his classmates pick on him. They valued his contribution and he became one of them. Every morning when Sam got off the bus he would ask me what we were doing in gym that day and I would toss him my keys. He would get everything ready, put up the nets, and get the balls out so we would be ready for class. It was a fun time for me. When people are needed as contributors they bond, invest, and grow! Sam grew to be a fine young man.

Coaches have a responsibility to find a way to keep kids in sport. Sam won one race and became accepted. Imagine how his life began to unfold. For years bullies picked on him. For the first time he felt a sense of belonging. His whole world opened up. When players feel accepted by their team they reach far greater heights and their true abilities and personalities come forward. Yea Sam!

