



5

His Best Time

by Elizabeth Van Steenwyk

Lenny put on his running shoes. Then he started his stretching exercises. Up, down, up, down. “What good does any of this do?” he wondered, as his leg muscles gradually loosened. “I’m not getting anywhere on the track team. I might as well quit.”

He continued to loosen up. He hoped Mom wouldn’t hear him through his closed bedroom door. If she knew he was going to run tonight, she would be angry. No, not angry—scared. She was certain that there were dangers waiting for him out there. Dangers! Ha! What a laugh!

Now he slipped out of his room, down the stairs, and through the hall. So far, so good. He opened the front door.

“Lenny? Where are you going?” Mom called from the living room.

“Just out,” he said.

Her voice came closer. “You’re going out? At this hour?” She appeared at the end of the hall. “Lenny!” She saw that he was wearing his running clothes. “You’re not going to run now. Not this late.”

“Why does she do this to me?” he wondered. She was always treating him as if he were a kid who didn’t know the score.

“Mom,” he said. “I run at night because it’s cooler then. You know that. Half the team runs at night. So most of



the time I'm running with the other guys. Nothing is going to happen." He started out the door.

"Lenny, be careful," Mom said. Then she called after him, "Don't run for too long."

Lenny headed for the parkway down the middle of Main Street. It was a good place to run. The team used it during the day for regular workouts. And at night some of the guys on the team ran there. As Lenny ran, he felt the soft grass under his feet. His legs moved in a steady pumping motion. He breathed easily.

Then he asked himself the question he always asked when he ran at night. "If training is this easy, why can't I ever win a race?" As he turned off the street onto the parkway, he thought, "Maybe I really ought to quit."

When he went out for track, he just wanted to make one of the school's teams. There weren't that many kids on the track team. So he figured he had the best chance of making that team. After all, what was there to running? He had two legs and a good set of lungs. And he knew how to run. There was nothing to it. Right?

Wrong. He hadn't counted on Coach and on all the miles he had to put in. He didn't know there would be such stiff competition to keep a place on the team. He didn't realize that the other runners would be that good. For months he had been trying to **improve**. But nothing seemed to work. He was probably going to lose his place on the team. Maybe he should quit now. What was the point anyway?

As he ran, he noticed how quiet it was. Where was everybody? Was he that late tonight? Well, he had waited until after the 11 o'clock news began. Maybe it *was* a little later than usual. Well, he would just do a few easy miles and then go home. There was no sense in burning himself out if he was going to quit.

Coach often talked to him about his attitude. "You can make a breakthrough anytime you want to try," the coach had told him one day. "I think you have the ability. But you don't practice hard enough. You've got to try harder."

"But I *am* trying, Coach," Lenny remembered saying.

"No, you're not," Coach had said. "You're not trying at all. You *think* that you're trying. But you're not trying hard enough."

"What does he think *this* is?" Lenny thought, as he decided to pick up his speed a little. "Yeah. What does he think this is—a ride on the merry-go-round?"

Lenny was opposite the big bank now. He looked across the street at the clock above the door. This was the place where he began his timed mile. He and the other guys always started from this spot. They ran down Main Street to the bank on the other side of town. The distance was exactly one mile. It was a good way to check your time when you ran.

Lenny glanced over at the clock to see the time. Then he said to himself, "Okay. Ready. Set. *Go!*"

He ran at a steady, easy speed. "I have to pace myself," he said. "That way I'll have plenty of strength left at the end of the race if I need it."

Boy, he really felt good tonight. He was running by the post office already. A quarter of a mile was gone and he hardly felt a thing. Maybe he'd dare to pick up his speed just a little. He used his arms now, pumping them up and down. He felt a little sweat on his face. His heart began to beat a little faster. It was so quiet, the only sound that he heard was his own breathing.

He ran past the large windows of the grocery store. As he did, he thought he saw another reflection there. "But how could that be?" he thought. "How could there be another reflection if no one else is running but me?"

He suddenly had the feeling that he wasn't alone. Was that the



reflection of someone who was running behind him? Or was he just jumpy because Mom's talk about danger was making him nervous? "Relax," he told himself. "Just take it easy and relax."

He continued to run, feeling a little funny. Then, without breaking his rhythm, he turned slightly. In the shadows, he saw a large dog. It was running about half a block behind him. Lenny felt a sense of relief. It was nothing but a dog. Dogs often ran with the team just for the fun of it. Maybe this was one of those dogs.

Lenny turned to look at the dog. But he didn't recognize it. As the dog got closer, Lenny could see just how large the dog was. As a matter of fact, the dog was huge. What kind was he?

Now there was another dog, the same kind of dog, running next to the first one. What kind were they? They looked sort of wild. They looked like wolves he had seen in movies. Suddenly Lenny didn't like their looks at all. A shivery feeling ran up his back. He began to run faster.

He was halfway through his mile now and running quite fast. Why didn't someone else show up, even someone he didn't know? He didn't like the idea of those two dogs running swiftly and silently behind him. Why didn't they bark? Why were they so eager to catch up to him?

Lenny looked again. They were closing in on him now. He saw saliva dripping from their tongues. Their teeth flashed in the streetlight's glare. Their eyes never left his body. Now they were close enough for Lenny to hear them growling.

Suddenly Lenny understood. They were coming after *him!* They weren't running just for the pleasure of running. Those dogs **intended** to tear him apart! He had heard of that happening. He had heard of dogs that once were pets, dogs that suddenly turned mean and vicious—that turned into killers!

Lenny ran as hard as he could. Sweat streamed from him as he pumped his legs. He kept running as fast as he could. Still, he felt as though he were stuck in mud. No matter how hard he pushed himself, the dogs kept gaining. What would it feel like to be torn apart? What would it feel like to be ripped to shreds by those strong, sharp teeth?

What could he do? Nobody was around. Nothing was open. There were no places that he could run into for safety. It was up to him now, if he was going to escape.

"Think!" he screamed to himself. "Think!"

He heard the dogs' **savage** growling clearly now. He even thought he could feel their hot breath on his legs. He tried to think of something. All the while, he continued to run as fast as he could.

Think! What do you do with dogs like these? What do you do with dogs that run out of control like this?

He didn't know much about them. Mom never let him have a dog. She said that if he got a dog, he'd have to train the dog and make it obey.

Make it obey! Lenny thought of something! His neighbors had a dog. They had taken it to a school where he had watched them train it.

Now the dogs were right behind him. He only had a second or two in which to act. "Now!" he told himself. "Do it now!"

Lenny turned and jumped high into the air. He thrust both his arms in front of him as he came

down. He screamed with every ounce of strength he had in his body. "Stay!" he screamed at the dogs. "Stay! Staaaaaaaay!"

The moment seemed frozen in time. But the dogs sat down. They stayed—as they had been taught to do a long time ago. It worked! Lenny almost collapsed with relief. It worked!

With his arms still stretched in front of him, he backed away slowly from the dogs. He made sure



never to take his eyes off the dogs. He backed away from them until he was about 50 feet away.

"Hey, you there. What are you doing?" someone called. He hadn't heard the police car drive up along side of him. Lenny glanced up. He saw that he was across the street from the bank. He had run a mile. When he noticed the time on the clock, he could hardly believe his eyes. The clock said 11:19.

"Officer, would you mind driving me home?" Lenny asked. On the way back, he explained what had happened.

Lenny got out of the police car in front of his house. He went inside. He walked down the hall toward the lights in the living room. At first he hoped that Mom would be asleep. Then he changed his mind. He was glad Mom was waiting up for him now.

"Is that you already, Lenny?" she asked, without looking up from the television set. "You're back early."

"Yes," Lenny said quietly. He paused for a moment, enjoying the words he was about to say. "I did my best time ever in the mile tonight."

"That's nice," she said. "I'm glad."

"So am I," he answered. "For a lot of reasons!"



LOOKING FOR FACTS IN THE STORY.
How well can you find facts in a story? Put an x in the box next to the right answer.

- Lenny's mom was worried because Lenny was
 a. doing poorly in school.
 b. planning to leave the team.
 c. going out to run at night.
- Coach said that Lenny
 a. was trying too hard.
 b. wasn't trying hard enough.
 c. was going to lose his place on the team.
- How far was it from one bank to the other?
 a. half a mile
 b. one mile
 c. two miles
- Lenny stopped the dogs from attacking him by
 a. running into a store.
 b. climbing over a fence.
 c. jumping up and shouting, "Stay!"

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

EXAMINING VOCABULARY WORDS.
Here are four vocabulary questions. Put an x in the box next to the right answer. The vocabulary words are printed in **boldface** in the story. You may look back at the words before you answer the questions.

- Lenny had been practicing for months. He wanted to improve. The word *improve* means
 a. quit.
 b. start.
 c. get better.
- In the streetlight's glare, Lenny saw the dogs. A *glare* is
 a. a bright light.
 b. a shadow.
 c. a mirror.
- He suddenly realized that the dogs intended to tear him apart. The word *intended* means
 a. forgot.
 b. planned.
 c. hated.
- Lenny heard a savage growl. The word *savage* means
 a. friendly.
 b. wild.
 c. silent.

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

ADDING WORDS TO A PARAGRAPH.
Complete the paragraph below. Fill in each blank with one of the words in the box. Each word appears in the story. There are five words and four blanks, so one word in the box will not be used.

Roger Bannister was the first person to run a _____¹ in less than 4 minutes. On May 6, 1954, Bannister _____² a mile in 3 minutes 59.4 seconds. About a month later, another _____³, John Landy, broke Bannister's record. Since then, many runners have run a mile in _____⁴ 4 minutes.

under team ran
mile runner

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

READING BETWEEN THE LINES.
These questions will help you think critically. You will have to think about what happened in the story, and then figure out the answers. Put an x in the box next to the right answer.

- Lenny ran so hard that night because he wanted to
 - a. please Coach.
 - b. stay ahead of the dogs.
 - c. get home early.
- The story shows that Lenny
 - a. was a very slow runner.
 - b. always ran as hard as he could in practice.
 - c. didn't always run as hard as he could in practice.
- We may infer (figure out) that the dogs listened to Lenny because
 - a. they were afraid of him.
 - b. they liked him.
 - c. they remembered what they had been taught.
- Probably, Lenny will now
 - a. become a better runner.
 - b. leave the team.
 - c. run only once in a while.

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

NOTING STORY ELEMENTS.
Some story elements are **plot**, **character**, **setting**, and **mood**. Put an x in the box next to the right answer.

- What happened last in the *plot*?
 - a. Lenny backed away slowly from the dogs.
 - b. Mom asked Lenny where he was going.
 - c. Lenny looked at the clock and began to run.
- Who is the *main character* in the story?
 - a. Lenny
 - b. Mom
 - c. Coach
- Where is the story *set*?
 - a. a school
 - b. a bank
 - c. a parkway on Main Street
- Which word tells the *mood* of the story?
 - a. funny
 - b. serious
 - c. sad

x 5 =
NUMBER CORRECT YOUR SCORE

THINKING MORE ABOUT THE STORY.
Your teacher might want you to write your answers.

- ◆ Coach said that Lenny could "make a breakthrough at any time." What did Coach mean? Did Lenny make "a breakthrough"? Explain your answer.
- ◆ Lenny told his mom that he was glad he did his best time that night. Then Lenny added, "For a lot of reasons!" What were some of the reasons?
- ◆ What did Lenny learn about himself? About Coach?

Use the boxes below to total your scores for the exercises. Then write your score on pages 138 and 139.

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