

Runner-Up

Zach checked the laces on his running shoes and then began stretching his hamstrings. He glanced at Jordan, two lanes over. Jordan had won every race he'd ever entered, but in Bennington's meet against Elmhurst last spring, Zach came in only two seconds behind him. "Jordan isn't going to win this time," Zach thought. "I've cut at least three seconds off my time since the Elmhurst meet."

Today wasn't a meet or anything like that, but it was an important practice. The coach would be making up his mind about which runners should be in which events this season. Bennington's first meet was just two weeks away, and Zach had been training hard. His granddad would be coming from Wisconsin to see him race. Grandpa Morgan had been a track star himself. He had won lots of medals and even ran in the Olympics. He was always telling his friends about his grandson Zach and how Zach would run in the Olympics, too, someday. Knowing that Grandpa Morgan would be watching him made winning more important than ever to Zach. Coming in second just wouldn't be good enough. Besides, he had told his granddad that he was the best runner on the team.

The flag went down, and Zach flew around the track. He was out in front, exactly where he wanted to be. At the halfway mark, he felt someone moving up behind him, but no one passed him. Three-quarters of the way to the finish line, Zach felt someone pushing for the lead again. It has to be Jordan, he thought. Zach had pressed so hard to be in front that he didn't have enough energy left to hold the lead if another runner challenged him. So far, however, no one was passing him. Zach's body ached, but he didn't slow down. He knew he had to hold on. Suddenly, the other runner made his move, crossing the finish line just ahead of Zach.



Wiping his face with a damp towel, Zach headed for the bleachers.

“Whoa,” said a voice behind him. “Great race, buddy. Thanks for tiring out the other runners with that fast start. It made winning a lot easier for me.”

Zach turned to see Jordan grinning at him.

“Save a little speed for the last half,” Jordan continued. “Then, next time, maybe you’ll finish ahead of me—if I’m not so far out in front you can’t catch me, that is.”

Zach felt angry, but he tried not to show it. Whenever Jordan wins, Zach thought, he always has to rub it in and tell me how I should have run. Worse than that, however, Zach knew that Jordan was right. If he had just paced himself and held back a little at the beginning, Zach knew he could have ended with a burst of speed and won.

“Thanks,” Zach said to Jordan when he had his breath and his temper under control. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The other runners began crowding around Jordan, and for the first time, Zach was glad that Jordan was the center of attention. Their conversation was over, so now he wouldn’t have to congratulate Jordan on running a great race.

For the next two weeks, Zach tried holding back on the track, but it just didn’t work for him. He either had to be ahead at the beginning of the race or found himself lagging behind for the whole race.

“Don’t worry about it, Zach, buddy,” Jordan kept reminding him. “I can coast in just fine this way. And if we take first and second, we’ll put more points on the board for Bennington.”

The coach put both Jordan and Zach on the relay team. “Keep it fast,” the coach told them, “but not so fast that you use up your energy for the big race. With both of you on the team, just think of it as a warm-up. Zach, watch how Jordan handles it. He was on the relay team last year. Remember, we need the points, not a record.”

Zach liked running more than anything, although he often thought that he’d like it even more without Jordan around. Grandpa Morgan always told him that the great

thing about running is you're competing with yourself. You keep trying to better your own record each time. Zach guessed that Grandpa Morgan never had to worry about anyone like Jordan. Actually, Grandpa Morgan was just like Jordan—the one who always came in first.

The morning after Grandpa Morgan arrived from Wisconsin, he and Zach went running before Zach left for school. He told Zach about some of his races and about the Olympics.

"Maybe you should finish your last two years of high school in Wisconsin," he told Zach. "I know a great coach—me! I'll have you ready for college and the Olympics by the time you graduate."

Zach wanted to run in the Olympics, but would his granddad still think he was good enough if he saw Jordan come in first at the meet? On the day of the meet, Zach and his granddad were up before anyone else. As they ate breakfast, Grandpa Morgan talked about nothing but running.

"Gramps," Zach interrupted, "I have to tell you something."

For the past week, Zach had thought about what he should say to his grandfather. He finally decided to tell the truth even if it meant that Grandpa Morgan wouldn't have anything more to do with him.



"I'm not the best runner on the team," Zach blurted out. "I know I talk like I am sometimes, but Jordan has never lost the mile, and I'm not as good as you were."

"There's only one sure thing about running, Zach," Grandpa Morgan replied. "No matter how fast your feet fly, there's always someone who can cross the finish line in front of you. I won lots of races, but I lost some, too. I ran in the Olympics, but I don't have any Olympic medals. Sure, I

hope you'll take up where I left off, if that's what you want. But even if you come in next to last, you're still the greatest grandkid I could ever have."

"You know, Zach," Grandpa Morgan continued, "running was my whole life for so long that I don't have much else to talk about. It's time I stopped talking about running and learned about some other things. After the meet, let's go somewhere for dinner, and you can tell me what else is going on in your life. Maybe we should take in a movie, too!"

Questions About *Runner-Up*

1. How did Zach feel about Jordan? Explain your answer.
2. Why was Zach always losing to Jordan?
3. Why did Zach think it was more important than ever to win the race at the first track meet this year?
4. What did Grandpa Morgan think was the great thing about running?
5. What did Grandpa Morgan tell Zach was the only sure thing about running?
6. After Zach told the truth, how did Grandpa Morgan's attitude about running seem to change? Why do you think his attitude changed?

Related Words

Many words take on different forms with related meanings. Read the definitions for each set of related words below. Then write the correct word to complete each sentence.

1. **compete**—to go against one or more opponents to win or to be the best at something

competitive—having a strong desire to win or succeed in a contest or competition

competition—a struggle to win or to be the best at something; a contest

competitor—a person or group competing against others in a contest; an opponent

a. The winner of the state dance _____ will win go on to _____ in a national contest.

b. Mark was a strong _____ in our local bowling tournament.

c. Mary is the most _____ player on the school's softball team.

2. **challenge**—(n.) an invitation to take part in a contest; something that is difficult to accomplish successfully (v.) to invite opponents to compete

challenger—the person who invites others to compete; a competitor

challenging—difficult to accomplish successfully

- a. It was the most _____ race Zach had ever run.
- b. Coming in first didn't seem much of a _____ for Jordan.
- c. Mel's _____ watched him warm up for the broad jump.

3. **congratulate**—to praise another's accomplishments

congratulations—expressions of praise for another's performance or good fortune

- a. Our surprising victory earned _____ from _____ our opponents.
- b. Everyone gathered to _____ the team's most valuable player.

4. **event**—a particular contest or activity or a part of a program

eventful—having many events or occurrences

- a. Zach was picked to run in the relay _____ at the track meet.
- b. Saturday was an _____ day for Zach and his grandpa.

Multiple Meanings

A. Many words have more than one meaning. Write the letter of the correct meaning for the word in bold type.

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|------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| a. reduced | b. examined | c. moving in front of |
| d. marked | e. sliced | f. meeting the minimum requirements |

1. The runners **checked** their shoelaces before the race.
2. Kate **checked** each box correctly on the answer sheet for the exam.
3. Zach had **cut** his finish time by three seconds since his last race.
4. My mother **cut** her finger while she was peeling carrots.

5. The runners were moving up behind Zach, but no one was **passing** him.
6. Not a single student was **passing** Mr. Sadler's algebra class.

B. The same word can be used in different ways. Write noun or verb for each sentence below to tell how the word in bold type is being used.

1. The first track **meet** of the season was two weeks away.
2. Steve was anxious to **meet** his new roommate.
3. Zach had to **press** hard to stay ahead of the other runners.
4. The newspaper was ready to go to **press**.
5. The coach told Zach to save his energy for the big **race**.
6. Zach's grandfather came to see him **race**.

C. Write two sentences for the word record. Use the word as a noun in the first sentence and as a verb in the second sentence.