

Pass It On®... You Can Do This

Roland is trim and fit. Yet in his early forties, his knees are giving him trouble. He hobbles across the infield of the track, shouting encouragement to runners, pausing to give a little instruction, gathering the hundred or so small athletes together for organized drills and stretches. If one misses a practice he calls their home. They start at 8 years old and finish at 18. Welcome to the Cheetahs inner-city track club. It's family. The only cost is \$15 dollars for a t-shirt and shorts. Roland was the first in his family to go to college. He earned his degree and put his hand on the business plow, looking forward to working his way up the corporate ladder. But his heart had other ideas. Track had changed his life. He took a teaching job at a local high school and started the Cheetah's track club. Standing among the rapt young runners he can slip easily from street lingo to coach talk. To follow him around at a track meet is to be awash in his boundless optimism. "None of these kids have to be what their circumstance tells them they have to be," he says. And indeed, as the years have gone by, he's watched former awkward striders become doctors and lawyers, coaches and clergy. Roland preaches from his stadium seat pulpit: "A third place earns points. A sixth place pushes teammates ahead of you. "Any effort is better than no effort."

A good road trip can strain any family. But for the Cheetahs, it only strengthens the bond. At Nationals in Chicago, teams from legacy programs in Atlanta, New Jersey, Los Angeles and New York stepped off shiny, chartered busses wearing matching travel gear accompanied by not only coaches and trainers, but also team pastors. The Cheetahs arrive in cramped family mini-vans, carrying groceries from home and packed ten kids per room. The volunteer coaches share a room with Roland and the few parents who could make the journey satirically named the Cheetahs "The team with the mismatched water bottles."

But on the first day of workouts before the meet begins, the optimism is at an all time high. Kids wander into the lobby for the free continental breakfast giddy and excited. Roland woke early and ate eggs and bacon, then sits with the team. "My gut doesn't like sugar anymore," he says. Maybe

because he is so full of sweet optimism he can't stomach the artificial glucose high.

This morning, like every morning starts with a team meeting: high doses of "you can do this!" and "this is going to be your best time all year!" Roland knows about the power of optimism. He nearly lost all of this to a pain killer addiction after his second knee surgery. He just couldn't kick it. He went into rehab, that lonely, isolated place where the only person who can save you is yourself. Plenty don't make it. But Roland did, by taking it one day at a time and telling himself over and over again "you can do this."

The Cheetahs win their share of medals at Nationals. More importantly, the mismatched water bottle club is by far the loudest group in the stadium. "You can do this!" they chant from the bleachers. And of course, they do.

You Can Do This...PassItOn.com

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