

Anyone who ever failed a test at school can identify with Tyler Davidson.

Anyone who ever had a parent hound them about grades could, too.

Tyler's father went one step further: Tyler ended up in summer school.

But that's where he discovered a friend (one boy and one girl), and a sport that challenges like no other.

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A failed test

Tyler Davidson slouched in his seat and ignored his teacher. Outside, in the July heat, a solitary runner ran intervals on the cinder track around the football field.

The teacher crept up. She stood for a moment by his desk. Tyler knew she was waiting for him to lift his eyes, to admit she was *there*, admit that he was wasting his time. *Wasting* everybody's time.

“You didn't do so well this week,” the teacher said, gently placing his Friday test paper face up on the desk. “Not very well indeed.”

On the track, the runner completed his two-lap run, checked his watch and walked in a circle on the infield grass.

Tyler looked down. His paper was blank – except for his name, partially written in thick black letters:

Tyler Davidso . . .

His pencil had broken that morning when we wrote his name: Tyler Davidson. He hadn't bothered to sharpen his pencil so never did finish the 'n'.

The only other mark on the paper was a tiny 'O', in the teacher's tiny hand, with her tiny initials.

She held the paper down with the fingers on one hand. Tyler could tell she was waiting.

"Tyler, I can wait all afternoon. Is this how you want to spend the rest of Friday? A detention would be more fun."

Outside, the runner appeared again on the track, running strong.

The teacher did not move. Her hand remained calmly on the test paper. Finally Tyler lifted his eyes.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" the teacher said.

Tyler shrugged.

"Tyler, you've spent a week in class doing little more than writing your name on work sheets. I have a hunch you are capable of more than that."

"Ain't nothing to tell."

Her name was Ms. Ramsahai. She had black hair almost to her shoulders, deep brown eyes. She was dressed for summer school: jeans, a golf shirt and running shoes.

Finally, she removed her hand from the paper. Tyler grabbed it and stuffed it into the bottom of his backpack.

“There is much to tell, Tyler,” she said. “We’ve finished one week out of six in this course. Unless you show that you can do this work soon, you are doomed.”

Tyler gave a small gesture with his shoulders and the corners of his mouth, like a mini-shrug. It meant: ‘Who cares?’

Ms. Ramsahai sat on the desk in front of him, grasped her knee in her hands and smiled.

“Tyler, I care. Nobody fails a course I teach. But you have to show not only that you *can* do the work. You have to *do* the work.”

He waited. He knew there would be more.

“So how long are you going to keep this up?” she said, softly.

Tyler stood, leaning all his weight on his left hip. First his father forcing him to go to summer school. Yanking him out of baseball and soccer. Cutting him off the Internet. Unplugging his computer. Now this teacher who wanted to *help*.

“Weren’t my idea.”

“Look, Tyler, I don’t know what’s going on at home that has you acting this way. Would my talking to your parents make any difference?”

Tyler shifted to his right leg. Much his 'rents cared. His mother in Halifax with that job. His father cutting off television along with everything else. *And* forcing him to fold laundry.

“Nothing more they can take away,” Tyler replied.

“We’ll think of that as a last resort. For now, this is between you and me, Tyler. You know what you have to do. And I know you can do it. But I really don’t think you want to accumulate any more Friday tests like this.”

He didn’t have words for any of this; he didn’t try to form any. The message was the predictable teacher’s message. ‘If you want to do well . . .’ Yeah. Blah, blah, blah. Sure.’

Holding his backpack by one strap from his shoulder, he expelled a deep sigh.. He shifted shoulders.

Finally, Ms. Ramsahai asked: “Is there anything I can do to help you through this?”

The silence was broken by the grating noise from the electric clock. Outside, he could hear a bicycle tire crunching on the cinder track. He drew a deep breath and expelled it almost impolitely.

“Can I go now?” he said.

He grabbed his backpack and shuffled out of the classroom. In the hallway he kicked at the waist-high release bar of the side door and stepped into the sunshine.

The sun and a stray breeze were refreshing after a morning in a closed classroom. At the edge of the track, the runner knelt by the triangular frame of an inverted bicycle. He spun the wheels, made adjustments, spun the wheel some more.

Up close, the runner looked smaller than he had on the track. He was older than Tyler, perhaps fifteen, but surprisingly, shorter. His close-cropped hair was dark blond or light brown. He wore a Raptors jersey and shorts. He glistened with sweat.

Tyler glanced once or twice at him. He didn't bother to speak. He still did not feel like speaking to anyone.

"Hand me that wrench, would 'ja?"

Tyler turned to the voice, even actually pointed to his own chest and mimed, 'Me?' But he didn't say it out loud.

"Ya. That one. On the ground beside you."

Tyler looked down. He picked up the wrench.

"Thanks. I'm just tuning up the bike. I'm running a triathlon a week tomorrow."

Tyler felt dumb, sucked into a conversation, yet still fascinated by this older boy. He had an animated look; a jock, Tyler thought, and that made him different from anyone else he had seen at summer school.

"Tri . . ." It was a big word, and Tyler did not feel comfortable with big words.

"Triathlon. Swim. Bike. Run."

“Yeah?”

“You’ve heard of Simon Whitfield, haven’t you?” He said it as though anyone who hadn’t heard of Simon Whitfield might be not very bright.

“Oh, yeah. I heard of him.” He had, but couldn’t remember details.

The older boy looked up. He smiled a bright, toothy grin.

“It’s okay to say you never heard of him,” he said. “A lot of people haven’t. He won a gold medal for Canada in the Triathlon. In the 2000 Olympics. In Australia.”

Tyler now felt mildly uncomfortable. For the first time, he wondered if it wasn’t time to return to class.

“Tri . . .” He still couldn’t get the word right.

“‘Tri,’ as in tricycle,” the runner said. “Means three. You know: three wheels on the trike . . .”

“I’m not that dumb.”

“Yeah, right. Any of us here in summer school are either dumb or didn’t pay attention. Besides, dumb means you can’t speak. Which you’re doing well at. Yeah, three events: Swim, bike, run. One after the other.” He paused to wipe sweat from his forehead with his left arm. “It’s the toughest sport there is,” he said.

Tyler smirked. “Hockey’s tough.”

“Sure, if you like getting bruised. If you think that’s tough. But in hockey you play for a minute then get a rest. That’s not tough. Try swimming 1500 metres, biking 40 kilometres and then running another 10. Without a rest. That’s what Simon did. In the Olympics.”

“You going to do *that*?” Tyler asked.

“Shorter distances. I’m racing in the same races Simon won nine years before he won in the Olympics. *Kids of Steel*. You heard of that?”

Tyler shrugged, said nothing.

“You in summer school here?”

Tyler nodded.

“Yeah. Well, I flunked Grade 10 math. But I’ll get it right this time.”

“English,” Tyler said, for the first time finding someone who might understand. “Been grounded. No soccer, no baseball.”

“Cruddy. Better than repeating a year, though. What time is it? You got the time?”

Tyler didn’t.

“I gotta see Mr. Jenkins before he gets away.”

“Your class over?”

“I got out at noon. That’s when I come down here to do my track workout.”

“I watched ya.”

“It’s math. I just didn’t pay attention in class last year. And fractions give me a pain. Who’d a thought that Grade 6 fractions would bother me in Grade 10? My name’s Kevin.”

“Mine’s Tyler.” It felt strange trading names like grownups. At school that wasn’t necessary.

“Okay, see you around, eh?” Kevin had stood his bicycle up, wheeled it to the nearest rack and locked it.

“Can you see that from your class?”

“What? The track? Yeah.”

“No. The bicycle rack.”

Tyler looked at the bicycle rack and the classroom window, where Ms. Ramsahai stood in the window watching. “Yeah, I guess.”

Kevin looked up at the window. “That your class? Mine’s on the opposite side of the school. If you can see this, then next week I’ll park my bike here and you could keep an eye on it. Okay? Even with a lock on it there’s always some dumb dork ready to do something.”

Tyler thought that would be okay. He didn’t have anything to do in class anyway. Watching a bike locked to a rack would be exciting.

Summer classes for all grades were held at the local high school next to the Courtice Community Centre. Any other time Tyler might have been thrilled to be at the high school, with its two

gyms, a greenhouse and, somewhere he had been told, a climbing wall.

When Tyler looked up to check the line of sight from his classroom, he could still see Ms. Ramsahai.

“Guess I better go,” Kevin said.