

## **Goldfarb's Red Scarf**

By Steven Womack

There was no visible, obvious reason why Nathan Goldfarb should be the worst runner—and perhaps the worst athlete—in Academy history.

On first appearance, it made no sense. His body was lean, lanky, with long legs and the outline of ribs showing through the skin of his abdomen. There was nothing superfluous about him. He was neither fat, nor clumsy, nor even that slow. In practice, he ran respectably if not spectacularly. At worst, he should have been a mediocre runner, an uninspired runner, or to use a phrase common at the Academy, an “underachiever.”

But no, Nathan Goldfarb was a *terrible* runner. He was the kind of runner who during cross-country season would stagger across the finish line not only dead last, but so far dead last that the stands would be empty, the opposing team on its way to the bus after clearing out of the locker room.

Goldfarb's problem was the voice in his head. A continuous mental monologue punctuated every painful stride, every stitch in his side, every agonizing gulp of air, until finally he was sandbagged by the relentless voice. All he heard was how much it hurt, how little chance he had. And as he fell farther and farther behind, the voice would begin to berate him, hound him.

Barely six weeks into Goldfarb's freshman year, cross-country coach Lou Wharton—whose lifelong nickname was “Stretch”—realized what he was up against and tried to palm him off on the soccer coach. By then, word had gotten around and it was too late. Athletics were compulsory at the Academy; always had been, always would be. And cross-country, with its inherent assumption that running involved no particular skill

beyond putting one foot in front of the other at a rapid pace, was the dumping ground for the boys who had little or no athletic talent. Stretch Wharton was stuck with Goldfarb, and probably would be for the next four years.

Midway through the season, after one particularly disastrous performance in which Goldfarb had come within seconds of posting the worst time in freshman cross-country history, Stretch summoned Goldfarb to his office in the back of the gymnasium. The tiny office was a converted storage room, with a desk, one four-drawer filing cabinet, and one metal folding chair for visitors.

Goldfarb timidly knocked on the door. "In!" Stretch yelled, his gravelly voice echoing off the painted cinderblocks.

Goldfarb opened the door and peeked in, his face paler than usual. Stretch swiveled in his tattered office chair.

"Goldfarb, sit down!"

Goldfarb entered, book bag over his shoulder, his rumpled khakis looking as if he'd slept in them, his food-stained school tie pulled down to the second button of his white shirt. Stretch motioned to the metal chair, then leaned back and extended his long legs across the desk, crossed them at the ankles, and intertwined his fingers behind his head.

"Goldfarb," he began. "I want to talk to you. Tell me, son, are you happy here?"

Goldfarb sat down stiffly and set his book bag on the floor. He shuffled in the seat as if trying to find a comfortable place. He looked across the desk at the tall, gray-haired man who stared at him through rheumy, bloodshot eyes.

"Well, son?"

“I—” Goldfarb stammered. “I don’t know, I never really gave—”

“How did you wind up here, Goldfarb? What made you decide to come to the Academy?”

Goldfarb looked down at his shoes. “Well, my father and my grandfather, they both—”

“Ah!” Stretch shouted throwing his head back. “So you’re Ben Goldfarb’s boy?”

Goldfarb’s brow wrinkled. His father had been captain of the track team in 1974, his senior year. His grandfather had been student body president and winner of the Headmaster’s Trophy in 1945, the year he graduated.

Now that Goldfarb was at the Academy, he didn’t like to think about all that.

“Yes sir,” he answered.

Stretch gazed at Goldfarb for a few seconds, the silence between them like the edge of a freshly-stropped razor. Goldfarb tried to meet the older man’s stare, but couldn’t. He looked down at the floor again and tapped his right foot on the floor.

“Have you got a nickname yet, son?” Stretch demanded.

Goldfarb blushed. Everyone at the Academy was given a nickname sooner or later, and the weaker the boy, the more cruel the nickname.

“Yes sir,” Goldfarb whispered, glaring at the concrete floor as if trying to make it give way so he could dive into the earth and pull the dirt in after him.

“Well?”

Goldfarb looked up. “It’s Goldfart.”

Stretch’s laugh bounced off the walls. “Goldfart! I love it.”

Goldfarb stared. He didn’t.

“Son, you can be a decent runner!” Stretch growled. “It’s in you. It’s in there somewhere. All you have to do is dig until you find it.”

Goldfarb’s nose itched, but he was afraid to scratch. “Okay, Stretch, I—”

“Good, son, I’m glad we understand each other! Now get out there and make us proud!”

Goldfarb stood a bit too quickly, relieved that he was getting off this easily. He grabbed his book bag, turned, and stumbled out the door.

Stretch watched the kid struggle to leave his office, then sighed as the door shut and he was once again alone. He had seen this before and he knew what the problem was.

Goldfarb, he knew, had no heart for this sort of thing.

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The years and the seasons went by: cross-country in the autumn, winter basketball, track and field in the spring. Goldfarb went through the motions, quietly and steadily proving himself to be one of the worst athletes in memory. Goldfarb managed to survive, however, even fitting in with a certain category of boys who came and went for their four years at the Academy without ever making much of an impression on anyone.

It was Academy tradition that any boy who persevered even when he lacked the skill, talent, speed, or agility to make the Varsity team would be allowed to run up enough points his senior year to earn a school letter. There were always easy competitions somewhere during the season where the lesser-equipped boys could be thrown into the breach without causing too much risk to the season record.

The year Goldfarb turned senior, the first cross-country meet of the season was against the local public high school. The public schools put most of their efforts into

football, and as a result their cross-country teams were generally much weaker than those of the private schools, one of the few instances in which this was true.

As the boys filed out of the locker rooms in their thick cotton warm-ups, a steep chill was already settling in. Even though it was early September, the leaves had started to turn and the first frost had been recorded. It was four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, and even now the sky was darkening.

Stretch Wharton stood at the starting line with his clipboard in hand, scanning the list of boys and planning his strategy. His assistant coach, Leo Ripley, who also served as both a Spanish teacher and housemaster for the largest dormitory, approached him.

"What's it look like, Stretch?" he asked.

Stretch looked up at the sky. "Snow, damn it," he muttered. "Early this year."

Ripley smiled. "No, I mean for the line-up."

Stretch took the pencil from behind his right ear and quickly checked off twelve names, then handed the clipboard to Ripley. Ripley stared at it a moment.

"No," he finally said. "You can't—"

"Got to," Stretch said. "He's a senior."

Stretch reached into his sweater and pulled out a whistle on a lanyard. He blew into it, hard, and the shrill warble echoed across the field. The boys jumped up from the grass where they'd been stretching and ran across the cinders to the starting line in front of the bleachers, which were slowly filling with spectators.

"Here we go," Stretch barked. "Today's starters. Adams, Benchley, Dortman, Dubus, Goldfarb—"

Time seemed to stop as the boys collectively gasped. They all turned, stared at

Goldfarb, and as they did, a smile spread across the thin, tall boy's face.

Stretch rattled off the names of the rest of the starters, then walked away for a quick confab with the opposing team's coach. A few moments later, he looked at his watch, walked back to the starting line and blew hard on the whistle again.

"Two minutes," he commanded. "Line 'em up!"

Then he turned just as Leo Ripley walked up to him. Something caught his eye and he stopped cold on the cinder track, his brow curling into rolls of flesh and his eyes bulging.

"What?" Ripley asked. "What is it?"

Stretch nodded and Ripley turned his head. "Jesus," he muttered.

The crowd of runners was off the track, shucking their warm-ups, adjusting jock straps, shaking off the last minute nervousness. At the edge of the crowd, Nathan Goldfarb had just neatly folded his warm-up and placed it on the ground. As he stood up and turned, the other boys saw what Stretch Wharton and Lou Ripley had already seen.

Nathan Goldfarb wore a long, shiny red silk scarf around his neck. He'd tied it loosely at the throat and thrown it jauntily over his left shoulder, where it hung limply almost to his waist.

"What the hell?" Stretch whispered.

Ripley shook his head. "I've never seen anything like it."

"What do we do?" Ripley said after a moment.

"I don't know," Stretch answered.

"We've got to do something," Ripley said.

Stretch's eyes narrowed. "Get me Weezer."

George “Weezer” Wilson, the captain of the cross-country team in the fall, the swim team in the winter, and the track team in the spring, was one of only about six twelve-letter men in Academy history. The son of a senator, Wilson was a brilliant student, exceptional athlete, had a winning personality in public, and had barely missed being elected student body president the previous year. Already into Harvard on early admission, Wilson was astonishingly arrogant even for someone with his qualifications.

“Yeah, Stretch,” Wilson said as he trotted to the coach. He brushed his straight blond hair back over his head and squared his broad shoulders.

“Weezer, step into my office,” Stretch said, and the two walked a few yards down the track out of earshot.

“What’s with the scarf?” Stretch asked.

Wilson shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen it before.”

“We’ve got to do something about it,” Stretch said. “If I do it, it’ll look like I’m trying to stifle his individuality, or some such bull crap. Besides, he’s a senior. But if you do it...”

Wilson smiled. “Consider it done.” With that, he turned and trotted off toward the group of boys, who were doing calf stretches in a circle on the grass a few yards from the starting line.

Weezer Wilson walked up to the circle, leaned down, and tapped Goldfarb on the shoulder.

“Hey, Goldfart,” he said. “C’mere.”

Goldfarb stood and followed Wilson over to the side of the bleachers.

“Look, Goldfart, the guys and me got together and, well, we had a little talk.”

Goldfarb gazed at Wilson. This was perhaps the fourth or fifth time in their four years at the Academy that Wilson had even acknowledged his existence, and the only time the two had ever had a private conversation.

“Yeah,” Goldfarb said hesitantly.

“It’s the scarf, Goldfart. It’s got to go.”

“Wait a minute,” Goldfarb said.

“No, it’s embarrassing. You’re embarrassing all of us.”

Goldfarb’s shoulders sagged, as if someone had let the air out of him. “It’s the first time I’ve ever been a starter. I was just having a little fun,” he said weakly.

Weezer Wilson gave him that award-winning smile, that smile that had already gotten him more sex than any other senior in the history of the school, and threw his arm around Goldfarb’s shoulder.

“Hey, Goldfart, it’s no big deal. It’d be different, you know, if you were like... any good or anything.”

“Okay,” Goldfarb muttered, shaking his head. He reached up to untie the scarf. As he did, a cold drizzle began falling.

The timekeeper blew his whistle and the runners gathered at the starting line, the Academy boys in their clean, pressed uniforms and the public high school kids in their ratty, unmatched shorts and T-shirts. Most of the Academy boys wore expensive track shoes—Pumas, Adidas, Sauconys—while the public school boys all wore cheap tennis shoes.

The timekeeper raised his starter’s pistol in the air and fired. In a blur, the mass of boys stampeded down the track past the stands.

The three-mile-long cross-country course began on the track, continued around the hockey pond, then along a line of trees on the other side of the track, through a long field, then out of sight of the stands. For the next fifteen minutes or so, the boys ran down a long incline that tempted many of them to speed up as the running was easy. It was all a set-up, though, as the experienced boys knew. For right after the downward incline, they would round a turn and face Cross Country Hill, a long slope that became ever steeper for almost a straight mile. More than one young, overconfident boy had found himself on his knees halfway up Cross Country Hill losing his high-carb, pre-race lunch.

Stretch and Ripley stared hard as the boys left the track, rounded the hockey pond, then started down the tree line. By then, the pack was breaking up as the faster boys gradually worked their way forward, leaving the slower ones back.

Just before the fragmented line of boys began to disappear for the course's long second act, Stretch could make out through the rain, even with his presbyopic eyes, Nathan Goldfarb dropping farther and farther behind.

Stretch turned to Ripley, shaking his head. "Jesus," he muttered.

Goldfarb didn't even finish the race. He left the course with a cramp in his side before the crest of Cross Country Hill and cut back to the football field just as the public school boys were gathering up the last of their gear. A chorus of hoots and catcalls swelled as Goldfarb crossed the empty football field, his uniform soaked with a freezing mixture of sweat and rain. He ignored the insults and the jeers, walked over to the stands, picked up his warm-up suit, and with his head down, walked slowly to the showers.

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The long season went on, with winter arriving early that year. Goldfarb ran in a

few more races, but not once did he ever finish in the money. Not a single point did he accumulate toward a letter, and at the end of fall semester, his name was conspicuously off the awards list.

The last week of the semester, right before finals, the Green & White games began. The Academy colors were green and white, and each boy who attended school was labeled—in a process so secret that no one even knew how it came about—as either Green or White. It was a label each boy would wear all his life. The only exceptions were the legacies; they alone knew what they would be. Goldfarb's grandfather was Green, as was his father.

The Green & White Games were intramural; only the boys who had not lettered in a school sport were allowed to compete. It was a chance for the younger, less talented boys to win a little glory for themselves. The games were historically a raucous time, with lots of pranks the week of the games. Greens and Whites would compete to see who could pull off the most outrageous stunt.

The Green & White cross-country race was the last event and the highlight of the games. As the week progressed, the weather began to get worse. A storm blew in from the Canadian plains, across the Great Lakes, and down through the Midwest like a juggernaut. As the boys filed out of the gymnasium on the blustery, frigid last day of the games, snow had already begun to fall in stinging torrents. The crowd of runners shivered at the starting line, jumping around to stay loose, eager to begin the race if for no other reason than to get it over with.

“Are we waiting for anyone?” Stretch yelled above the howling wind. As he did, he turned toward the gym and saw a lone figure crossing the parking lot, headed toward

the stands. He squinted, then turned to Ripley.

“I don’t believe it,” he said.

“What the—? Can we let him?” Ripley asked.

“I don’t think we can stop him.”

“But he’s a senior,” Ripley snapped. “Seniors never run the Green and—”

“He’s never lettered,” Stretch answered. “We can’t stop him.”

The younger boys lined up at the starting line as Nathan Goldfarb trotted up to the stands, unzipped his warm-up pants, turned and dropped them. Then he stood, grabbed each sleeve with its opposite hand, and with one smooth, quick motion, pulled his jersey over his head.

Hanging from his neck, draped loosely over his left shoulder, was the red scarf.

“*Jee-zus*,” Ripley whispered. “He’s at it again.”

Goldfarb loped over to the starting line and joined the mob of boys standing in the cold. The snow was beginning to accumulate now, obscuring the black cinders of the track and the grass on either side. The wind blew the snow so hard that no one could see beyond the 100-yard lane. Two hundred yards away, the hockey pond was covered in a thick mist.

Goldfarb stood next to Brad “Be-Rad” Hamilton, a sophomore who had missed making the Varsity team by only six seconds. He’d captained the J.V. team and was on track to be about an eight-letter man by the time he left school.

Hamilton glared at Goldfarb, then reached out and flicked the red scarf. “Where the hell you think you’re going, Goldfart? I’m gonna kick your ass.”

Goldfarb looked down at the boy, who was more solid but about four inches

shorter. "Be-Rad, just shut up and run."

"Let's get this over with!" Stretch yelled just beyond the starting line. "It's cold out here." He raised his arm in the air and fired the pistol.

Goldfarb almost tripped as the crowd of boys surged around him. He got his footing, finally, and began the run in a relaxed canter, his arms pumping, his head up, running directly into the sharp, stinging snow as it blew straight down the track. At the end of the 100-yard dash lanes, he hung in with the pack as it left the track and turned toward the hockey pond. His lungs were beginning to burn as he took in the frosty air, but for some reason he couldn't fathom, it didn't hurt. In fact, it felt good. Nathan Goldfarb had never felt good running before.

As the herd of runners rounded the hockey pond, Be-Rad Hamilton pulled solidly into the lead. The boys ran into the mist that floated above the water, and for a moment Goldfarb lost sight of the leaders. He concentrated on keeping his footing and working on a rhythm and then something began to happen, something he'd never experienced before.

He stopped thinking.

This had never happened before. In every other race he'd ever run over the past four years, Nathan Goldfarb had never stopped thinking, never stopped listening to the voice.

But now the voice was still. Now there was only silence, both in his head and around him. As the ever-lengthening string of runners crossed the embankment after the hockey pond and began the long run down the tree line, even the sounds of footsteps and breathing all around him began to lessen. The silence deepened and soon Nathan Goldfarb could only hear the sound of his own easy, relaxed rhythmic breathing.

He picked up the pace, and as the run continued, Nathan Goldfarb began to pass people. The first few were the small boys, the weaker ones who couldn't keep up even in an intramural race. But then he began to pass a few of the older boys, the boys who were solid Junior Varsity performers, the boys with athletic futures. The group reached the end of the tree line and turned left into the field that would take them out of sight of the stands, and for the first time in his life, there were more boys behind Nathan Goldfarb than in front of him.

He passed one runner who turned as he went by and gave him a look of surprise. The group exited the field and began the run down the long downhill incline. This was where the voice in his head would tell him, over and over again, to pace himself, to hold back, that Cross Country Hill was just in front of them and that it would *kill him* if he hit it with nothing left.

This time the voice was quiet. Nathan relaxed and let the wind and gravity pull him onward. He ran faster, his stride lengthening, his arms flying loosely out to the side. It had never felt like this before. He was running fast enough now that the scarf was flying behind him, pulling on his neck, tightening around his throat. He reached up with his right hand, hooked his index finger through it, and tugged the scarf to loosen it.

He was nearly at the bottom of the incline now, his legs and arms flying. He passed one boy as the spray of sleet and snow lessened enough to see ahead of him, just beginning the long run up Cross Country Hill, the panting body of Brad Hamilton.

Nathan felt pressure on his legs and lungs now as he began the steep run up the Hill maybe twenty yards behind Hamilton. There was nothing but the rustling of the wind in his ears. He was not even aware of his own breathing; he was, in fact, aware of nothing

but the run—only the run, and the fluid, almost Zen-like trance that had begun to settle over him.

Nathan could see Hamilton's legs, the normally smooth rhythm broken now by the strain of the Hill. There was an obvious weightiness, a clumsiness, to the younger boy's stride. Nathan sensed instinctively that Hamilton was tiring.

They were three-quarters of the way up the hill now, Nathan a scant few yards behind Be-Rad. Be-Rad turned, saw who was right behind him, almost crowding him now, and snorted.

"Goldfart, what are you doing?" he gasped. "Get the hell out of here before I kick your ass."

"Screw you, bucko," Nathan said between breaths. He pumped his arms harder and two strides later, found himself beside the younger boy.

"I mean it, Goldfart," Hamilton warned, his voice breaking. "Back off."

Nathan flapped his wrists at the end of each swing to loosen them up, then pushed even harder as they approached the crest of the hill.

"Damn it," Hamilton yelled, then threw out his right arm in a wide arc, connecting with Nathan's chest, clotheslining him.

Nathan started down, his feet slipping, and as he felt himself sliding, his feet tangled with Hamilton's and they both went down in the snow.

Hamilton went down chest first, the impact knocking the breath out of him, but Nathan rolled as he fell. As he hit the ground, his momentum carried him over Hamilton's splayed body, mashing him even harder into the ground. He banana-rolled past him and came back up onto his feet. As his feet churned and caught the ground,

Nathan was off again with barely a missed stride.

The crest of Cross Country Hill was just in front of him. Nathan glanced back. Hamilton was still down, face-first in the snow, just beginning to pull himself up.

As he topped the Hill and started the downward side, Nathan Goldfarb was alone. He stayed alone, his legs spinning, his pace actually picking up as he bottomed the hill, turned, ran past the right side of the hockey pond, and back onto the track. Across the football field, the few spectators left in the stands stared, astonished, at the red scarf flapping behind Goldfarb in the stiff winter wind.

Goldfarb rounded turn three of the track, sprinted around the curve into turn four, then down the straightaway toward the finish line. The boys in the stands began cheering and yelling, then standing on the wooden bleachers and stomping their feet. A cheer arose from the throng: *Goldfart! Goldfart! Goldfart!*

Tears ran from Goldfarb's eyes, in horizontal streaks from his eyes to his ears, turning to ice almost instantly. There was ice in his hair now, the sweat in his jersey already beginning to crystallize. He was aware of the wetness, a moisture on his face that was different from the normal sweat. There was a fierce burn in his lungs, as if his chest were about to burst.

*Goldfart! Goldfart! Goldfart!*

Goldfarb grinned broadly as he approached the finish line. Out of the corner of his left eye, he saw the first of the other runners climbing the embankment and coming onto the track. He wasn't certain, but he was pretty sure the closest guy behind him—nearly a quarter-mile back—was not Be-Rad Hamilton.

For the first time in his life, to the cheers of perhaps two dozen of his classmates

who had braved the snowstorm to watch, Nathan Goldfarb broke the tape at a finish line.

He ran on a few steps past, then stopped, leaned over and let his head hang down, his hands on his knees, his chest heaving. He was already starting to tighten up in the cold, but he didn't care. Over his shoulders, the boys cheered on.

He straightened, stared up at the gray, heavy sky for a moment, then turned and watched the stands. The red scarf hung down off the left side of his neck, wet and heavy. He grabbed it with his right hand and threw it recklessly over his left shoulder. The boys cheered even louder.

Decades later, he would remember this as the finest moment of his life.

At the finish line, Stretch held the stopwatch up, straining to read it through the blowing snow. Ripley walked up to him.

"How'd he do?"

Stretch held the stopwatch out in front of his assistant. "Kid took fourteen seconds off the school record."

Ripley grinned. "Unbelievable. Maybe we should've let him wear the bloody scarf all along."

Ripley's smile was not returned. Stretch glared first at him, then turned toward Nathan Goldfarb as he stood there silent and still in front of the stands.

"Bull," Stretch snapped. "Kid's a loser. If he could do it today, he could've done it before. What good's it do now?" Stretch raised his clipboard to note the time, then turned and walked away.

Behind him, Nathan Goldfarb stood in the snow, gazing up at the crowd, as the cheers went on.