

(Note: After the Rectors received a copy of my story that was originally titled “Run Cary Run,” they changed the name to Kelly, the name of the daughter for whom V. T. yelled. I use that version here. hm)

## **RUN KELLY RUN**

**By**

**Howard Merrell**

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By the time the young women who run the distance events began their last minute stretches, stride-outs and psych-ups, the track meet had taken on a certain subdued character of its own. At any one time you could observe some athlete totally focused on giving his maximum exertion to his event, while nearby another participant would be taking a nap. Groups of participants who had already competed earlier in the day stood around and talked. Spectators were hot, hungry, and tired. Their attention to the events was sporadic.

As the parent of a distance runner, I had become familiar with the pre-race ritual. The routine had an almost religious regularity. Those of us who knew the liturgy could tell that the girls 1600 meter race would begin soon.

The talk in the stands, among those of us who knew and cared, turned to: Who was fast? Who hadn't been doing well? We wondered what kind of time the pre-race favorite, last year's state champ, would have. The parents and loyal fans were moving to places where they could see better and more effectively yell encouragement to their favorite runner. Watches were cleared. The fans have their ritual, too.

Then I heard it—not the real thing, only a weak imitation—from out of a group of fans I heard, “Run Kelly Run”. The three words uttered by a veteran fan brought instant chuckles and conversation from all of us who heard.

“Is he here?”

“I think he's on the bleachers on the other side of the track.”

“I wonder if we'll hear him over here?”

Those of us who knew him had no doubt he would be heard—maybe in the next county. Everyone else was soon convinced.

The crack of the starter's pistol had hardly died—the girls were still accelerating; the faster contestants had not yet distinguished themselves from the starting pack—when we hear the voice, the real thing. It boomed across the infield with a power that defied one to not look for its source. The voice, sort of like an articulate chainsaw, the

two end words elongated for effect, the last slightly less than the first, “RUUUUN KELLY RUUUUN!”

We were in the presence of a phenomenon, before whom lesser mortals had to shrink. I am loud, and I often yell myself hoarse at sporting events, but this man is the Babe Ruth of cheering. The Sultan of Chant!

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Like a fog horn on a stormy night, the chant repeatedly fills the track, the bleachers, the surrounding countryside. The three words of encouragement so fill the air that it is difficult to find the point from which they emanate. Just the other day I found the source. I was near enough to him that I could hear not only the famous three words, but words of endearment and quiet encouragement he shared with his daughter when she ran near his seat—or standing place—or pacing area. The famous chant came from the heart of a dad who loved his daughter so much that he was willing to make a spectacle of himself to help her run. She chose to run. He was going to do everything he could to see to it that she did it to the best of her ability.

“Run Kelly Run!” was still echoing in my mind when I thought about the kid to whom I had given a thumbs up, a “Way to go!” after his event. I remembered another youngster I had congratulated about a good finish. I wondered about the disappointed kid for whom it just hadn’t happened that day, or the one for whom everything had clicked—he had the performance of his life.

Don’t get the idea that these are generic kids, made up to flesh out a story. Each of them has a name. Each of them is real. Each participated in the same track meet as Kelly, but there was no one there for any of them.

I had never seen a mom or dad there to yell for any of these kids. Oh, there were those of us who seek to encourage them to run, throw or jump, but it isn’t the same. It can’t be. Our cheers are sincere, our wishes genuine, our desire to encourage, console, challenge is real. I’m sure they appreciate the recognition, but I’m equally sure that all of it together wouldn’t measure up to one single heartfelt word of praise from someone who really cares today, cared yesterday, and will still care tomorrow.

Kelly didn’t win that race. She came in second, behind the state champ, but she ran a good race. I am confident she did her best. I don’t know Kelly or her dad, but I think she will continue to do so.

I don’t know what kind of a father he is. I only know that on race days he models something that our culture, our kids, could use a lot more of—parents who are willing to give their kids the priority in their lives that they desperately need and deserve.

My bellowing friend went to the track meet to encourage his daughter to run. In the process he encouraged me to be a better dad.

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**Newspaper Footnote:** Howard Merrell doesn't really know Kelly Rector's father, V.T. Rector, III. Merrell—from another town and rooting for another team—noticed Rector's enthusiasm for his daughter. Three words inspired this story and caused a stranger to re-examine his own role as a parent. Rector, a graduate, former teacher and coach at Patrick Henry, has been an educator in Washington County, VA, since 1966. He is currently principal at Rhea Valley Elementary. Kelly, a 1995 graduate, was All-State in cross country and currently attends James Madison University. She ran track the first two years but suffered a hip injury and no longer competes.