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A Labor of Love: the McFarland Story

By Mark Arax, reprinted with permission of the Los Angeles Times where it appeared on 1 Dec 1997

McFARLAND, Calif.—Like so many dreams that come and go here, this one began with the harvest under a brutal sky.

It was a late afternoon in August, 103 degrees outside, and the boys from the McFarland High Cross Country team had been at it since 5:00 in the morning. They had spent the day in long sleeves and bandannas working without words alongside their parents deep in the fields. They were spread across farms for miles around, but the toil did not vary.

They stooped and crawled. They knelt under vines powdered with sulfur and climbed high into trees. They cut, pulled and snapped. Up and down, row after row, the boys lugged the yield of the San Joaquin Valley—grapes, peaches, plums, nectarines, bell peppers and water-melons—until the crew bosses called it a day.

And now the sun was setting and the fields were silent, and they were going back into the orchards, this time in running shoes.

They stretched their calves and hamstrings under a big hay barn at the edge of town, 15 long-distance runners in T-shirts and shorts. Their tall, blue-eyed coach, Jim White, was spooning out drops of a herbal "voodoo juice" to rub away the aches.

"How long do we go, White?" one boy asked. The group looked up from the exercises, awaiting his verdict. He was seated atop a worn bicycle, his rickety ride through the fields, and he smiled a wicked smile. "Until I get tired."

Summer after summer, the footprints hardly change. McFarland High's dream to bring home a state championship begins the same way: the families from rural Mexico finish another day in the fields and hand over their fleet-footed sons to Coach White, a *k a Blanco*. And they watch as he leads the boys back through the fields, to championships and other miracles, too.

With runners drawn from farm worker families too poor to buy racing shoes, the McFarland High Cross Country team has won five state titles in a row, a feat unmatched in any sport by any high school in California. They've beaten the rich kids from Carmel Valley and the surfer kids from Laguna Beach. They've beaten prep schools, suburban schools, Indian reservation schools and the big boys from L.A.

Now a new season had come, and the *campesinos* [fieldworkers] were gunning for No. 6, running not just for their families and the coach pedaling alongside them, but for this town battered by poverty and mysterious childhood cancers.

They ran past the alfalfa and kiwis and the smelly dairy with its 300 Holsteins and the ditch water silted green, first a jog and then a sprint. One mile, two miles, four, six and eight. From a distance, their stampede hardly a patter, they looked something like angels kicking up dust in the middle of the almond trees, floating on a brown cloud.

They ran 10 miles and then jogged back home. Over the next four months, through summer heat and winter fog on the road to the state championship meet, they would train 1,500 miles. They would have

run more if White had asked them.

This is the story of the 1997 season with the boys from McFarland High, their quest to reign once again as the unlikely champs of California Cross Country. It is a journey extraordinary not only for their athletic achievement but for what they had to overcome to even be in the race.

In a town where so much has changed so quickly, the team's remarkable success is one of few things people can count on. The old McFarland, a thriving little community pierced by Highway 99 on the outskirts of Kern County, has vanished. Gone are most of the Dust Bowl refugees and the small businessmen and farmers



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who built Main Street and the Pentecostal churches under mulberry trees.

The new McFarland, population 8,011, is something closer to a village transplanted from south of the border. Nine out of ten residents are of Mexican descent. One-third come from the village of Huanusco in the state of Zacatecas [about 90 miles north of Guadalajara].

Families squeeze six and eight children into two-bedroom houses. Roosters peck at front porches, and laundry hangs from ropes strung tree to tree. The sons of farm workers who want no part of the fields, the Myfa Boys and Southsiders, fight over a pitiful turf.

Though it sits at the edges of America's richest farms, McFarland is one of the nation's poorest cities. And for two decades, it has been plagued by cancers striking its children... "The cancer cluster ain't the only thing we're famous for," City Manager Gary Johnson bristled, pointing to the six California silhouettes on the side of the gym. "This is the home of the state Cross Country champs. Five in a row. Now they're going for No. 6."

Until a decade or so ago, when Coach White hung his first championship banner, none of this would have been possible. The men of dirt-poor Huanusco would arrive in McFarland in April and leave for Mexico in October, after the last raisin had been turned. There was no time for the young ones to attend school most days, much less become champion runners.

Now a historic shift is remaking McFarland and other rural communities in the state's heartland. Many migrants have stopped migrating. The reasons are almost entirely economic. Over the past 10 years, despite numbing poverty, they have patched together enough earnings to buy houses, bring family from Mexico and carve out full-time lives here.

The transition from illegal migrant to legal neighbor has given the children the chance to learn English, become the first in the family to graduate from any school—and play sports along the way. It has brought home the hope that the grip of the fields might one day be broken.

And yet the little these families have managed to scratch out would not be possible without the wages of their children, fieldworkers as young as 8. So the children are pulled in two directions, tugged by the duty to work beside their families and by their dream of breaking away.

All summer long, the team's finest runners, José Perezchica, 18, and José Arambula, 17—"the two Josés" as they are known here—worked and trained in the fields on five hours of sleep. They had grown up near each other in Huanusco and now were good friends quietly

competing to be the best high school long-distance runner in the state. For now, Perezchica was the faster one.

Once school started in September and the season began, both boys picked and pruned only on weekends. They struggled to learn English in time for graduation, knowing it could be the difference between getting into college or not.

Arambula was ahead of Perezchica in language class. So much so that when the fancy recruiting letters came—from Stanford, Yale, Harvard, Columbia, NYU—Arambula hoped that one of the letters might really lead to something. He saved them in his dresser drawer, beneath the Mexican flag. Perezchica tossed his letters away.

Their 56-year-old coach was so committed to seeing that they had every chance at a different life that he blurred all lines between work and home. The boys were family and when they knocked on his door at all hours, White answered. He never stopped digging into his own pockets to help them. His wife, Cheryl, and three grown daughters would have it no other way. "White ain't white," one boy explained. "He's Mexican."

A season with the McFarland High Cougars, as they trekked up and down the state in an old school bus, wasn't about fanfare. There were no cheerleaders doing back flips as the team's top five runners pounded a grueling 3.1-mile course and strained to cross the finish line before the top five runners of other teams. There was no homecoming queen caught between the letterman's jackets of the two Josés.

McFarland's road to the championship was something more: the work that constantly beckoned; the herbal potions and vitamins that White administered to the weary like some shaman; the two boys from the same village 200 miles away who would run their last high school race not knowing where it would end—footprints in or out of the fields.

In the middle of August, a week before school started, José Perezchica awoke at 4:30 a.m. alongside his two younger brothers. The floor fan had been whirring all night and the window was open, but the 100-degree heat made for miserable sleep. He got maybe three hours.

He rose from his bed, a folding metal lounge chair, and wrung out the night from his powerful 5-foot 7-inch frame, his lean runner's legs. He opened the drawer of a battered dresser held together with duct tape and put on a frayed long sleeve shirt, jeans and the one thing that would mark him as something special: the red and black hat embroidered with the five state championships across it.

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His brothers were sound asleep. He tiptoed into the dark living room, turned on the TV and watched Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck argue whether it was duck season or wabbit season. "I understand everything they're saying," he said in Spanish, pointing to his head. "But I just can't talk. Something is blocking. I think I came here too old. My little brothers speak a lot more."

...Sitting on the couch, José saw the lights of an old Buick, his ride to the vineyards. His parents were picking grapes in a field closer to town. His mother handed him lunch in a plastic bag. She wouldn't see him again until that evening, after he finished work and the long run. She had overheard the conversation about his trouble grasping English and told him not to worry. School was around the corner, he would work hard.

Deep in a dark vineyard swirling with dust, McFarland's No. 1 runner found the row with his name on it and waited for the sun to rise. Kneeling in the powder, he parted the vine like a curtain and stepped inside. A swarm of gnats flew in his face. The blade hung from his wrist on a string of leather and with a flick he began to cut the green-yellow bunches of Thompson grapes and drop them into his tub. When the tub was full, he spread the bunches on brown butcher paper to bake in the sun.

It took him a minute and 20 seconds to make one tray. He had just made 17 cents. In the distance, a radio played Mexican polka and a farm worker yodeled. He tried to imagine himself running. The day went faster that way.

In the tiny one-bedroom apartment he shares with his mother, brother and sister, Rudy Ballardo got ready for his night-time run. It was a few weeks before the start of summer training, and Coach White was expecting big things from him. His older brother, Galvin, was the finest runner McFarland ever produced, a two-time individual state champion in 1993 and 1994. And Rudy,

17, had been blessed with the same talent, leading the team to two more state titles as a freshman and sophomore.

But he had slipped up his junior year, and now he was heading into his senior year, and he hadn't run in months. He could barely look Coach White in the eyes.

In the bedroom decorated with medals that spelled out a giant McFARLAND, he put on his baggy pants and

stuffed a marble-sized "eight ball" of crystal methamphetamine into his pocket. He was going out to meet his connection. He kissed his mother goodbye and stepped into the warm night.

Just past the school, a couple blocks from home, a cop busted Rudy. He spent the night in juvenile hall. The next morning, he sat at the kitchen table with



The 1997 Team (l to r): Coach Amador Ayon, Marcos Urbina, José Perezchica, José Arambula, Michael Muñoz, Coach Jim White, Aurelio Valasco, Julio Duran, Sal Medina, Andrés Gomez, Coach Ruben Ozuna.

his family and White.

Of all the ways to kick off the new season. The team was ranked 20th in the nation based on the expectation that three stars from last year, the two Joses and Rudy, would be returning.

"Don't you see that this day has been coming?" White told him. "Slowly by slowly, first the new friends, then quitting running, drinking. Look what you're doing to your mom."

"I did it for her," Rudy said. "To earn some cash."

"I always taught you to do right and bring no shame," Juana Lopez shouted, sobbing. "For what? A lousy \$100. I will work a little harder in the fields if need be."

All through August and September, as authorities did not pursue charges against Rudy, White and the boys kept dropping by his house to coax him to run. His back or leg was always hurting. Miguel Aguilar, a senior who had replaced Rudy in the No. 3 spot, vowed he wouldn't rest until Rudy rejoined the squad. "I don't mind running fourth because we're a way better team with Rudy," he said. "We could win the state easily with him. Without him, some teams are going to get close."

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Coach White was losing patience. "Rudy's a talent, but we have to go on. Right now, Rudy needs us more than we need him."

José Arambula had spent the September day picking plums beside his younger brother Juvenal, climbing 800 times up and down a ladder with a sack of fruit strapped to his belly. And now it was an hour before the first meet, and he stood in the backyard imagining the season to come.

Already the tallest of the runners, he had grown taller and more muscular since last year. His legs were sore from the work, but he wasn't dreading the run through the orchards. "I look forward to the end of day. All the guys are out there. White is there."

His father was building a cinder-block fence and drinking a beer, and his mother was stirring chili into a pan of pig intestines. They had worked their own full day in the fields. His little brothers chased each other through the dirt yard. They had planted corn with seed from Huanusco. It was growing as poorly here as it did there.

"I was 8 years old when we came. That was the first year I worked in the grapes. Sometimes I run better the harder I work."

He was fourth man on last year's team, but this season was different. He was challenging Perezchica for the top spot. "I told Perezchica last week that he doesn't have to worry about me. Not yet," he said in his quiet voice. "At the end of the year. State."

He sat down next to Juvenal to rest his legs but kept getting up to make sure the little ones were out of harm's way. He worked hard to put his words into English. It came easier for 16-year-old Juvenal. Juvenal was dressed like a rapper. He said he didn't like the baggy style, but to wear anything else risked being shamed by the farm worker kids born in America.

"I used to dress that tight style but they call you a 'webber'," Juvenal said.

"Webber" is short for webbed feet, for crossing the border by water. And that was the case. The brothers' first race was a wade through the river and dash across the border, holding hands. A decade in America and Jose wasn't sure what the future held.

The fields? "Probably. Maybe." But what about the dream of college, running? "Different world." What about the letters from Georgetown, Brown, Navy? "I'm not sure what will happen. Too many things right now."

Juvenal had heard enough. "Right now we're going to school to do better than our parents. You know it's hard work in the sun. You know what Dad says. 'You are going to school to pass what I am doing.' If you're going

to end up in the fields, why not quit school and start working now?"

José let Juvenal have the last word. Later, on the way to practice, he offered a compromise. "Maybe Fresno State or Bakersfield. If I go to college I have to be close to home to help my family in the fields."

They gathered on Jim and Cheryl White's front lawn; the two Josés and Miguel Aguilar and 15 other runners, but no Rudy.

In the driveway, leaning on White's red 1959 Chevy pickup, was a handful of McFarland's past champions, now in their late 20's, a dust of gray on the sideburns and something more around their middles. They are Blanco's secret weapon, the graduates who run each day with the team and shepherd the boys through rocky times as a way to give something back. To a man, they credit White with carving a path out of the fields and changing their lives. Amador Ayon teaches 7th-grade math. Thomas Valles stands guard at a prison. Ruben Ozuna is an English teacher. David Diaz teaches at the elementary school.

"This is where it all begins, guys," White said. "The state. We've got to start focusing right now." He spoke in a twangy voice that almost vanished in the wind. It was the closest he would come to a "Win one for the Gipper."

The boys thought he was a dead-ringer for Clint Eastwood in his prime, but his approach was a great deal more subtle. He was there every day, alongside them on his bike, and he used a light hand when guiding them. So fine a touch that they often failed to detect its sway. He rarely put his good deeds on display. There was a lot of sacrifice only they and he knew about.

"The key, the base, is running in the summertime," he told them. "And you've done that. By losing Rudy, it puts us closer to our main competition, Nordhoff of Ojai. We were a little ahead on paper. Now we're even. So let's go, guys. Let's hit the road."

They had come to the season after a summer of holding tamale sales and other fund-raisers. Still, the kitty was not nearly enough for the food, vitamins and gear needed for the 14-meet season. Every Saturday was another long ride out of town, and half the boys boarded the bus hungry. Some had no money for dinner after the race.

So White and the alumni handed out what they could. They drove their wives crazy buying running shoes every few months, not because they were worn but because they were handing down the old pair to yet another boy.

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In a single file, they jogged from White's house to the hay barn. The two-mile warmup was White's time to counsel and catch up, to teach a little without lecturing. It came naturally for the 8th-grade life science instructor.

Under the open-sided barn, they flexed their hips and raised their toes. "We're going to do segments," White announced. "A 10-minute run, then eight, then six and three."

One boy walked over to White and motioned to the coach's pocket. He took out a bottle of aromatic oils. It passed from hand to hand, drops dabbed on calves, backs, in mouths and up noses. It's voodoo juice.", one boy said. "Keeps you from sucking wind." The workday was done and the road was quiet. The fields were all theirs now.

They ran through the almond, walnut, corn, apricot, plum, alfalfa and cotton. Some of the farmers had cleared a path just for them. The grapes cooking into raisins smelled something between a bakery and a still. The sweet and the ferment mixed with the open air sewage of a nearby dairy. It was smelling salts for the weary.

White kept his promise until the end. Then, when the final three-minute segment was nearly over, when they thought they were just about home, he told them he wanted three minutes more. Some of the boys who could already taste the well water back at the barn collapsed. José Perezchica and José Arambula and Miguel Aguilar kept running, never breaking stride.

Back at the barn, when it was over, White gathered the boys who failed to finish. "What are you going to do when a guy takes off in a race all of a sudden? You didn't expect it. Two miles to go and he breaks out from nowhere. You can't say, 'No, I can't stay up with him. I'm tired.' You've got to stay mentally tough. It's a mind game."

Pep talk over, he rode back home, carrying on his handlebars the boy whose feet were bleeding because his shoes were too small.

They drove down to Ventura in early September and beat all the big schools except one. Their top five runners ran a combined 79.20 minutes, one second behind Saugus

High. José Perezchica ran his heart out and came in second. José Arambula was fourth.

They got home near midnight and White told them to keep their heads up. They had beat the time set by last year's team by more than a minute. Five hours later, a Sunday, Perezchica rolled raisins.

The next week in San Diego, they took on 70 teams. On a hilly course, they placed second. Perezchica was

dragging from all the fieldwork. White gave him vitamins and a magnet to relieve his sore back. He came in third, Arambula right behind. They got home late, vowing that they would train harder in the hilly orange groves. Seven hours later, Perezchica rolled raisins.

They blew away everyone at Porterville, 45 minutes down the road. The alumni were there. So were Miguel Aguilar's parents. They had left work early and, for the first time, saw their oldest son race. He gave his best performance ever. Cheryl White passed out seven dozen homemade chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies.

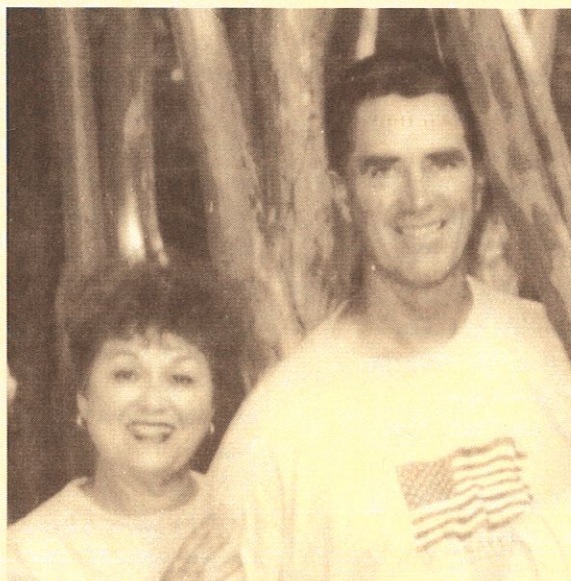
As the announcer read

McFarland's clean sweep, Thomas Valles stood off in the distance, watching with pride. The kid who led McFarland to its first state title in 1987 was now a correctional officer and new father. He came to most every practice and meet.

"I come from a broken family," he said. "My father was an alcoholic and he left when I was 14. My sisters got pregnant at 13 and 14. My little brother was jailed. I used to come to the meets with no money to eat with. The bus would pull up to a restaurant and I'd just shy away from everybody and say I wasn't hungry. White would find me and say, 'Come on, let's eat.'"

Late one night his parents got into a horrible fight, and he ran out the door and onto the overpass looking down on Highway 99. "I was standing there. I didn't want to go home. I can't say I was going to jump, but I was thinking about my life and why some people would jump. All of a sudden I saw these headlights and it was Mr. White in his '59 Chevy."

He paused, biting back tears. "I don't know how he found out I was there, but he did. I remember he said, 'Come here, Thomas, let's talk.' I got in and I realized at



Cheryl and Jim White.

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that point that the Whites were the ones who were going to get me through this."

As the harvest waned and the boys worked fewer weekends in the fields, the team put together a string of impressive victories. José Arambula was fast closing in on José Perezchica. At practice and meets, Perezchica seemed even more quiet than usual, almost sullen. He stood off by himself. At school, when his algebra teacher announced free time, everyone was chatting but Indio. He was head down, lost in homework.

On a Friday before a race at Griffith Park, he confided to one of the alumni that it would be his last run. "I'm quitting school to work in the fields," he said. "I'm bored."

It was dark, and White pedaled to the boy's house. "What's wrong, José?" he asked. José was leaning against his 1982 Cutlass, eyes at the ground. "I'm lost."

The coach recalled the boy who amazed him as an eighth-grader when he came out cold his first practice and ran 10 miles through exhaustion to keep up with the veterans. "You're not a quitter. You've never quit anything in your life. If you want to quit the team, that's one thing. But not school."

"How can I go to college? I hear, but I can't speak." It was one of the rare times he had risked a sentence in English.

"You're the hardest worker I know. You can learn. You're smart. We're here to help you. You'll make it to college, and you'll make it through."

He was too embarrassed to tell White that he was flunking his English class. The next day, he ran up and down the sandy hills of Griffith Park as if he were running against no one but himself. He finished first, the only runner of 1,000 to break 15 minutes. "When I'm running far ahead, I picture someone right in the back of me," he said after crossing the finish line. "Even when there's no one behind me, I hear the footsteps."

One of the McFarland fans who happened to drive to the meet was Linda Genel, a school board member who had worked with migrant children. She overheard someone say this was José's last race, and she pulled him aside and asked him to give her a chance.

"I can teach you," she said. "I'll be your tutor." He sat on a park table beneath a pine tree, considering her offer. "If I can get the help, I will do it," he said. "I feel much better." He would start the tutoring sessions on Monday, between his regular classes and running and working at night in a Mexican bakery.

They headed for the hills in late September and early October, terraced groves of oranges east of town, a new

runner in the pack. Rudy Ballardo was back, his shorts sagging and gut protruding, but he was back.

"Give him three weeks. That's all he needs," said Miguel Aguilar. Coach White didn't know what to make of this new, more humble Rudy. "With Rudy, we've got the team that can take state. But he's got to stay focused."

They jogged to a tight little row between giant orange trees and handed their crucifixes and chains to White. He gave the signal and they took off, their rumble growing more faint as they reached the crest. Some of the boys were fighting a virus and White decided to call it an early day. They piled into cars and headed home.

It was 7 p.m. and the blue-black sky had caught fire, a brilliant pink over the hillside, where the orange trees had been picked clean. White was watching the sun set when his car was stopped by three frantic runners in the middle of the road. A car carrying five boys had blown a tire and crashed in the orange grove, a collision so violent it uprooted three stout trees and demolished the car. They flew out the back window and landed 25 feet into the grove. Four boys were cut badly and stumbling like zombies. A fifth, Erik Perez, was flat on his back, not moving.

White was on top of Perez and calmly applied pressure to two wounds, one a severed tendon in the hand. "How did I get here, coach?" "Let's not worry about that now. Be still. Just relax." The boy started to shake like frightened rabbit, and White placed a tennis shoe under his head. "You're going to be fine."

The ambulance took them to a Delano hospital, and Jim and Cheryl White comforted the families in the emergency waiting room. A doctor said the boys were going to be fine, though the sore bones and stitches might sideline them for weeks. Relieved but not sure where the season was headed with the team's No. 4 and 5 runners injured, the Whites drove back to town exhausted.

So much had changed in the 35 years since they arrived fresh from a Christian college in Idaho. She was the daughter of a minister, and he was the son of a small home builder in Stockton. He had been a high school pitcher who never got a chance to shine, and he vowed he would treat his athletes differently. The town was nearly all white back then. Main Street boasted a market, a bank, hotel, feed and seed, theater, newspaper and mortuary. They were long gone now, replaced by the 99-Cent Store and El Cha Cha Cha bar.

They had thought of moving back to Idaho, but they stayed and raised their girls and took over the sermon duties when the church parish dwindled to a few. They marveled at the newcomers from Mexico who worked so

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hard and had so little to show for it. They built the boys and girls running programs from the ground up in 1980. An accident like this happened once before. It was in the fields in 1986. Two girls on the team were killed by a truck as they jogged across a road. The same month as this. The same hospital.

"We've had joy and heartache," he said. "Sometimes, I don't recognize the town anymore, but I'm not sure I'd change it back if I could." "These kids and their families have become our lives," she said.

November arrives a little weary in the San Joaquin Valley. The migrants who still cross the border have gone home, their vans no longer clanking down Highway 99. Here and there, the flat four-lane road is splattered with the guts and feathers of turkeys who jumped ship on the slaughterhouse drive. The fields, having given all they can give, look dog-tired. It is pruning time.

Miguel Aguilar's father was now a U.S. citizen. Just weeks before, he had stood with 1,238 other immigrants in a Fresno convention hall, listening to a Mayflower descendant sing the national anthem. It was easy except for the end, he said, when the judge made them stand and renounce their fidelity to any foreign state.

"It's not that I traded my country," Miguel Aguilar, Sr., said, clutching his certificate. "But this is where I live and this is a reality. For my children. Mexico is in my heart. It will always be there."

The team was having a hard time finding its groove. José Perezchica was passing English with help of his tutor and running like a champion, but the others seemed sluggish. José Arambula's performance had flattened. Miguel Aguilar, nagged by a bad knee, started to pout. The bottom two positions remained undecided. The old Rudy just wasn't emerging. White was waiting for someone to step up.

At a meet near Pomona, they finally got a chance to face off against the state's other power-house, Nordhoff High School. Except for the Josés, McFarland seemed intimidated. The boys from Ojai trounced them.

White gave them a good chewing-out after a meet in Fresno. He talked about commitment and leadership and the need to dig deeper. He recalled all his teams that came before, the runners who gave it their best and never found a way out of the fields. That night, comparing

notes on the season with Cheryl and looking ahead to the state championship, he wondered if his words had gotten through. What he was trying to tell the boys, he explained, but couldn't bring himself to say, was this:

Some of you will make it out, but many of you won't. College is there but so are

the fields. This season could be your ticket to a different life. But some of you will have to put your hopes on hold. You'll do what you did last summer, and you'll do it next summer, too. And pretty soon too many summers have passed and you're still in the fields. There's your life. That's the way dreams get lost here.

This may be your brightest moment. Everything seems possible and you are running, running toward a dream. This may be the finest time. Go get it.

They stepped up to the starting line in their regal red and white, a team at half strength. Rudy was not among them. He never found his runner's legs. Miguel's knee was better, but his times were so poor that his spot on the state team was taken by an underclassman. The two Josés, despite White's infinite ministrations, were down with chest colds. The Division 4 championship would be no easy prize. Several of the 14 small schools, lining up beside them for the three-mile race, were every bit as talented as the big schools in other divisions.

As the sun broke through the fog Saturday at Woodward Park in Fresno, the starter's gun sounded the



The 1998 Team (l to r): Coach Jim White, Julio Duran, Hector Galvan, Francisco Gonzalez, Carlos Cabinallas, Coach Amador Ayon, Andres Gomez, Lupe Aranjó, Aurelio Velasco, Arturo Gonzalez, Coach Ruben Ozuna.

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McFarland Story

(continued from page seven)

last race of the day. Powering uphill, Perezchica was right on the heels of the leader, a returning champ from Morro Bay. Arambula was within striking distance and so were two other Cougars. "Go Jose! Go," White shouted, dashing from hill to valley. "Go Joe. Go Cookie. The second mile is the key."

A mile to go, the boy from Morro Bay hurtled downhill all by himself. Then came three runners from Nordhoff. Perezchica had dropped to seventh, his face twisted in pain. All season long, his teammates had used his unfaltering legs to nudge their pace. Now, taking his cue, they lagged far behind.

The home stretch offered no McFarland miracles. Not this year. Blanco's boys finished fourth, the combined placement of their top five runners far behind the new state champs from Nordhoff.

White was too disappointed to muster any words. They were headed back to the bus, heads hanging, when the suburban boys from Ojai walked up, took off their crisp team shirts and handed them over. The boys from McFarland didn't know what to make of the gesture. So they peeled off their own shirts—emblazoned with their string of state titles—and traded.

They stopped to eat, but Perezchica wasn't hungry. He wasn't sure about school. He wasn't sure about ever running again. He got home and tried to sleep, but the race kept playing over in his mind.

On Sunday morning, he put on his shoes and headed to the almond orchard at the edge of town. It was raining and he took off down the muddy row, and he kept running until he hurt no more.

Next weekend would be the race to see if he could make the Western U.S.A. all-star team. The same Fresno course against some of the same top runners. After that

would be track season with Coach White, after that the summer harvest.

And after that, he didn't know.

POSTSCRIPT

As told to the Cross Country Journal
by Coach Jim White in early November 1999

Julio Duran, Andres Gomez and Aurelio Velasco were the only members of the 1997 team that returned for the 1998 season. Nevertheless, the 1998 team (pictured on page seven) managed to finish 5th at the state meet.

This year, all except Julio Duran and Lupe Aranjó returned and the team has done well, winning nine invitationals and the league championship. As we go to press, McFarland is ranked number one in their division state-wide. After November 27th, we will know if they have added a 7th state championship to their current total of 6.

What about the current situation for the individuals on that 1997 team, about whom the above Los Angeles Times article was written?

José Perezchica continues to be torn between trying to make it at nearby Bakersfield Junior College and helping his mother and siblings in the fields. He will be making his third attempt at BJC this coming semester.

José Arambula is now in his third semester at BJC and is just now completing his second Cross Country season there. He works hard to keep his grades up and comes to run with the McFHS boys when he can.

Rudy Ballardo is now serving his second sentence, this time two years, for being involved in a rumble in a town nearby. Coach White hopes he'll use his talents going to BJC when he gets out.

Miguel Aguilar is attending Fresno State University. Marcos Urbina is with the Marines in Japan. Julio Duran and Sal Medina are working. Andres Gomez is a Junior at McFHS and #1 man on the team this year.