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# Healthy

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**Author Bio**

Jared Richardson is a junior Cinema and Media Studies and German Studies double major. He grew up in Vermont--also referred to frequently as South Canada--and plans to work in the film industry.

## Healthy

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I casually kicked my legs up onto my desk, still barren except for a few scattered boxes pushed to one side. Rough, white walls surrounded me, covered with a few random posters. My feet weighed me down as I glanced over at the tattered gym bag resting languidly beneath my bed. The sun had just begun to rise over Gettysburg; my dorm had begun to cook and swelter as four fans fought to keep it cool. The white heat compared to that of two years earlier, on an August day in a small northeast town.

In my junior year, our high school soccer team dwindled. The varsity team had a surplus of players, but the junior varsity team lacked numbers. With only twelve members on the team, it strained the group to play through one game. One of my friends approached me and asked whether I could play. At first I thought he asked as a joke; at best my athleticism was average. I spent hour after hour inside, scanning pages of books or watching movies. I hadn't touched a soccer ball in years except for gym class. But he insisted, hounding me for days and calling up old favors. Each time he would see me, he managed to bring up the sport, practically forcing me to try it. Eventually, after dozens of text messages, I told him that I would speak to the coach. Perhaps the idea of being active drew me toward playing (or maybe I just wanted some silence from my friend) but I dragged myself outside in a blazing heat the very next day.

A blistering sun draped over the Vermont fields, to the point that looking out toward the horizon blurred the distant sights. Beads of sweat trailed down the back of my neck, snaking into the collar of my shirt. I walked the entire way to the soccer practice, with a small group of players lacing up cleats coated in rust-colored dirt. A middle-aged man looked on with a packet of multicolored papers and diagrams, as perplexed as a toddler. Uncertainly, I approached him.

"Excuse me," I stuttered out, "Are you Coach McQuade?"

"Huh? Oh, yep, that's me," he responded, turning. He carried himself cheerily, a wide grin stretching from one end of his face to the other. His hairline was receding, and a small gut crept out over his waist. "And you must be Jared! I heard that you'd be stopping by here." At the mention of my name, a couple of my friends on the field turned toward me. A couple of them hollered sarcastic and crude phrases to me between fervent breaths, and I shrugged them off. The coach had an odd smile that seemed to stretch across his entire body, like when one offers a dog a treat. "So have you ever played soccer before?"

"Not since fourth grade or so." He nodded, still giving that sort of eerie smile, clearly ignoring whatever I said. The coach had already accepted that his team would not be in any championships, and he just wanted to get a pay check.

"It's great that you're getting back into it though. You'd get plenty of playing time." At this, Coach McQuade turned toward the team with a look of slight disdain, before turning back to me with the same artificial grin. "You feel like joining up?"

I thought briefly about the commitment; every single day, in spite of drowning rains and burning heats, sprinting until exhaustion made me col-

lapse, spending nonexistent money on equipment. But some sort of force urged me to try it and attempt a new arduous experience, compelling me to forget my apprehension.

“I’d love to give it a shot.”

The very next day, I tried to relax in a school bus, heading to our first scrimmage. I didn’t have any idea how to actually play competitive soccer, and figured that my legs would be better suited for stumbling than kicking a ball. The coach only wanted me to watch and learn, but that changed when our last player contorted his ankle and could no longer walk. Coach McQuade had me put on the injured boy’s cleats—two sizes too small for my feet—and take to the field.

As I sprinted back and forth, passing the ball to teammates and struggling to breathe from the effort, I felt truly weak. That night, I could feel my legs creak and groan beneath the covers of my bed. They felt sluggish, as though they were submerged in water. That lethargic sensation nagged at me, practically screaming into my ears that I wasn’t good enough. That I wasn’t fast enough. That I wasn’t strong enough.

I couldn’t accept that.

When I finally felt sleep take me over and pull my eyes shut, I awoke with a newfound determination. I could change, and I felt a driving force take me over. I had plenty of time to get myself into shape. I wasn’t overweight, but I wasn’t thin either. But as I felt the aching pain tugging at my legs whenever I took a step, I knew I could improve.

“What the hell are you doing, Jared?” my friend Logan spat out between gargantuan bites from a Subway sandwich, eating before our practice again. My palms darkened, faintly dusted with maroon dirt as I pressed my chest down into the dirt, breathing heavily in rhythm with the strikes of my heartbeat. With all of the force I could muster, I straightened my arms rapidly, springing into the air and clapping my hands together, sending up a tawny plume of dust.

“Push ups,” I smiled sarcastically. “Come on, I know you’re not the smartest, but you should know what those are.” This happened every day at practice, each of us spitting out insults to each other and then laughing at our own idiocy.

The end of the season grew closer, and a sea of cardinal and amber leaves overtook the trees. Whipping winds had begun to pick up, but they were subdued today, with only soft zephyrs cascading across the field. I casually rotated my shoulder, letting the movement come easily. Instead of aching and sharp, jabbing pains, the only thing that I felt was better.

“Fuck you,” he shook his head. “I mean, why are you doing them now? We’ve got practice in twenty minutes anyways.” I didn’t stop my workout, still moving in a kinetic melody as the chalky dirt flirted with the callouses on my palms.

“It never hurts to get in better shape, man,” I countered. “I’ve lost like twenty pounds since the season started, and I don’t think that’s really awful. Not many of us have the metabolism of the gods.” Logan had a tendency to eat more than anyone I had ever seen, but stayed thinner than a flagpole. He shrugged and went back to his sandwich with a dismissive, “Whatever,” finding turkey and bacon more interesting than exercise. He remained altogether apathetic

toward soccer—only playing because of his friends—and acted as the leader for scoring goals against his own team.

Our practice started like most others; we passed the ball back and forth repetitively until our eyes glazed over, making the actions instinctive instead of methodical. We ran drills over and over until we got them right, almost rehearsing in anticipation of our final game of the season. We improved greatly, but better than bad is still mediocre. At the end of the practice, we lined up around the goal, preparing for sprints. My determination reached its pinnacle as I convinced myself that this would be the day where I finally would finish first.

I felt my legs stretch and creak as I pulled my calf upwards, mostly ignoring Coach McQuade's lecture about "improvement" or something similar. By this point his ambitions and goals had faded entirely, but mine were freshly fostered. My focus lay entirely on the opposite line, parallel to the one my left toes rested upon. Anticipation filled up my chest, tricking my heart into thinking that I began already. I let the coach drone on, my ears only tuned in for the shrill chirp of a whistle.

As the deafening sound filled my head, I took off as fast as I could. My cleats tore up the grass beneath me as my rapid steps lengthened, and the flowing breezes grew to gales. One leg pushed right after the other, propelling me forward and ahead of my teammates. Only one of them barely passed me a few seconds in, his feet precise with each step. I inhaled sharply, and summoned whatever strength I had to surge ahead. Unwilling to look to my side, I worried only about myself, pumping my arms back and forth in a desperate attempt to accelerate. I only let myself slow down when I had finished the sprint.

"Come on you guys," our coach yelled to the entire team. "You could learn something from these two." And that was all he said; ambivalence shrouded whether I had finally won or if I lost again. But that wasn't important to me. As we all sat around after practice, discarding ashen equipment and emptying bottles of water, the pins and pricks of pain that I had felt months earlier were gone. As I tested my feet on the soft dirt, kicking up a ghostly veil, I realized my body was filled with a vigor that I had never reached before. I got caught up in the general revelry of the group, everyone tossing back crude comments, knowing that the competition wasn't important.

About twenty minutes later, I carried two bags to the parking lot, setting them down to wait for my ride home. A bus rested a few yards away, with a group of girls chatting loudly in the back. The windows were shut, but I could still hear muffled laughs and chirps from where I was sitting. I lifted the bottom of my shirt to wipe my face, dabbing off the sweat and dust that started to form a thin mask. When I moved the fabric away and looked up, I saw faces pressed against the windows of the bus, giggling to one another. Simultaneously, they all turned away and their laughs rose. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, I felt proud.

The rest of my time in high school seemed to drag on. I knew I would be heading to college soon; in lieu of playing soccer again, I had to find a job. When I finally found employment at a local diner, it began to bear down on me. I gained all of the weight back. I had tried so hard just to finish the lap that I was on, straining my body and pushing its limits, but found myself back at the beginning. Now, two years later in an unfinished college dorm room, I

caught my eyes drifting, slowly finding themselves looking at that relic of a gym bag again. It looked at peace, almost as though dust had begun to gather at its straps already. The dark fabric looked onyx when draped with the shadow of the bed frame, and finally, my mind was made. I walked over and pulled it out.

Deftly, I pulled on a pair of athletic shorts and an old t-shirt, then I slid off my glasses and tossed them onto my bed. I tied my fraying running shoes, the sleek sound of tightening laces accompanied by a tight grip. I rose up from my knee, shaking my sleeping limbs awake, and walked outside.

The path to the gym lay ahead, straight and short, with the morning sun still stretching its arms over the small town. I took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp air and letting it fill my lungs as I plugged in my headphones to play some music. The sky was a brilliant blue, cloaking our small school in its expansive cerulean sprawl. A familiar burning torridity cloaked my entire body, summoning a soft sweat to the surface. The blazing white heat reminded me of those months that I spent sprinting across a verdant field, feeling a healthy heartbeat in my chest and a spring in each step as I endlessly pursued the ball. As the waking sun began to wrap its shimmering fingers around the morning—already steaming the morning dew—I let a smile slowly creep across my face.