

Running the Hills

You'll have to be quicker off the line to beat Kendall on Friday," Coach Dugan said.

Kendall, this, Kendall that. For weeks, I'd been hearing about how fast this kid was – Kerry Kendall from Wilson Middle School. I was tired of it.

"We still have time, Alex," Coach continued, glancing at his watch. "Let's keep after it."

I groaned, but walked back to the blocks. We'd been working on starts all day. In the 100-meter dash, a good start gives you a huge advantage.

Eric sidled up next to me. "I heard that Kendall kid trains at a camp with Olympic coaches."

"Yeah", Gerry added. "Not only that – I heard he cheats."

"What? No way," I said.

"Well, I heard he'll do whatever it takes to win." Gerry said.

That doesn't mean he cheats, does it, I wondered.

"Let's go, guys," Coach hollered.

I slipped my feet into the starting blocks and leaned forward on my fingers, waiting for Coach's signal.



Lately Coach Dugan had been pushing us extra hard.

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Tweet! His whistle sounded, and I exploded into my sprint. I pulled my knees high and drove hard toward the finish line. I crossed two full steps ahead of everyone else. That should satisfy him.

Coach Dugan clicked his stopwatch and nodded. “Better, Alex. But let’s do it again.”

Gerry heard that Kendall will do whatever it takes to win.

And again and again. I couldn’t get any faster. Besides, Kendall trains with Olympic coaches! And he cheats. Why bother?

Practice was never easy, but lately Coach Dugan had been pushing us extra hard. “you have to work harder than everyone else,” he said. “The extra effort marks the difference between a winner and a runner-up.”

Easy for him to say. He wasn’t racing Kerry Kendall the Great.

A light breeze greeted me as I hopped from Dad’s car and headed toward the track. My warm-up suit swished with each step. My legs felt strong and ready. Ready? Coach had me more than ready.

The infield bustled with kids from every middle school in our district. I scanned the crowd, searching for Kendall. I wanted a good look at my competition.

With his height, he’d be easy to spot. And long legs made you quick. Kendall shouldn’t need to cheat – not with his size.

I couldn’t see anyone extra tall, so I sat on the grass to stretch. I reached for my foot, grimacing at the tension in my calf.

“Are you Alex?” a voice asked. I looked up over my shoulder. A tall kid’s sweats flapped in the wind. Kerry Kendall. I nodded.

Kendall stared a little longer, then pulled off his sweats and plopped down next to me in a hurdler’s stretch. Was he trying to psych me out by warming up so close? I wouldn’t let that happen. I kept quiet, working my muscles loose.

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“Heard you’re fast,” he said, touching his nose to his kneecap. I paused and checked him out. His leg muscles bulged like he worked out plenty. He didn’t need mind games. He’ll do whatever it takes, Gerry had said. Save it for the race”, I said.

Was he nervous about this race?

Kendall shrugged. I continued stretching. After a minute, he asked, “Is it true you have a private trainer?” “A private trainer! Me?” I said.

Kendall’s eyes were wide, his lips taut. Was he nervous about this race? About racing me?

“That’s what I heard,” he said. “You paid extra for a pro.”

I laughed. Coach Dugan was good, but he was no private trainer. “Well, I heard you trained at an Olympic camp.”

He straightened. “You’re kidding, right?” He laughed and shook his head. “I train by running the hills at the park.”

“That’s it?” I said. “That’s all you do?”

“That’s it. After track practice I run those hills until my legs ache, then I sprint home for dinner. Every day. That sound like an Olympic camp to you?”

He ran hills after practice?

I pointed at Coach Dugan. “There’s my private trainer.”

Kendall looked and chuckled. A flustered Coach Dugan was juggling questions from eight guys at the same time.

When Kendall turned back, I saw the truth in his eyes. Running hills was brutal. And he did it after his regular practices. He’d worked hard. He wouldn’t cheat. How did those goofy rumors get started? Why did I believe them?

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Kendall stood and jogged in place. “Well,” he said. “Nice talking to you.” He started over to join his team.

“Hey, Kerry,” I shouted. He stopped and turned. “Good luck in the dash”.

He grinned. “Same to you.”

But the race wasn’t about luck. It was about who was fastest – and who had worked the hardest.

As I followed Kendall across the finish line later that day, I wondered, Why hadn’t I thought to run some hills.

Whatever it takes. I grinned as Kendall and I shook hands.



ELA Reading Comprehension Fiction Sample

Running the Hills

1. Why was Alex tired of hearing about Kerry Kendall?

2. Who told Alex that Kendall cheats?

- ☐ His friend Eric
- ☐ His dad
- ☐ His friend Gerry
- ☐ His coach

3. What is the meaning of the word “grimacing” as it is used in the following sentence from the text?

“ I reached for my foot, grimacing at the tension in my calf.”

- ☐ Making a face
- ☐ Making a noise
- ☐ Looking
- ☐ Feeling

4. How was Alex feeling after he met Kendall? Use information from the text to support your answer.

5. Why did the author choose the title “Running the Hills”? Use information from the text to support your answer.

6. The main theme throughout this story is:

- ☐ A good start gives you an advantage
- ☐ Rumours can be true
- ☐ Always be kind to others around you
- ☐ Hard work pays off

7. Was Alex upset when he lost the race? Use information from the text to support your answer.
