



The Embedded Reporter

Author's note: I was offered this opportunity to ride with one of the Section 6 indoor track & field teams to Cornell for the Southern Tier Invitational as sort of an "embedded reporter." I did think about wearing a flak jacket and helmet for the trip but I was assured the "troops" were friendly and not hostile. However, much like the reporters in Afghanistan and Iraq, I am not able to divulge who this team was or their location for security purposes. On a serious note, many thanks to the coach of this team for allowing me to go along and to the student-athletes who were nothing but ladies and gentlemen the whole time. I did have a great time.

I was debating whether to make the trek down to the Southern Tier Indoor Invitational (STI) at Cornell University a couple of weeks ago and was offered the opportunity to ride with a local team to the event. The decision came down to whether I wanted to get up that early and worry about staying awake while driving or resort to the old Greyhound Bus jingle from many years ago of "...and leave the driving to us!..." Besides, this could be an interesting experience riding a school bus for three hours with a herd of teenagers who I don't really know but what the heck, you live only once...

I was like a young child at Christmas the night before, tossing and turning in bed, either excited about the bus ride or just being nervous about missing the bus altogether. The alarm goes off, I drag myself out of bed, showered, gathered the camera and other paraphernalia and off to meet the bus. First thing that hit me, and I mean literally, was the cold air as the garage door opened. I believe the temps were sub zero that night and my lungs attested to that. After catching my breath, I figured I had plenty of time to get to my destination, I may as well be a gracious guest and pick up some "training food" for the kids...a quick stop at Timmy-Ho to pick up two family size Timbits seemed like the right thing to do. Later I would find out it wouldn't be enough for two busloads but it was the thought that counted as I kept telling myself.

Finally arrived at the departure point and waited in the car for a few minutes until a critical mass of kids gathered and followed them into the school foyer to await the busses. A collection of sleepy eyed kids wearing nothing more than track suits or pajama bottoms (for goodness sake, it was 5 degrees outside!) and collections of pillows, blankets, athletic bags and breakfast munchies for the ride. They didn't look any happier to being there than I did (it was 4:45am). Finally the busses arrive and everyone piles in, girls on one bus, guys on the other...all were jockeying for the back (an unwritten rule that never changes) to settle in and resume the deep sleep they were rudely interrupted from around an hour ago. Roll call taken by the coaches, some last minute directions to the bus drivers and off we go.

Now, I haven't been on a school bus in say, maybe 35 years and although they've added higher, padded seats and seat belts (does any one *really* wear these on a school bus?), not much has changed on these yellow transports. Anyone over the height of 5'8" should not be allowed to ride on these things...my knees felt like they were pushed up to my chest and my back hasn't been that straight up while sitting in years and my behind went numb after about 15 minutes. After some chit-chat with the coach, it was nap time,...yeah, right! First of all, I am just about as wide as the total width of the seat and to try and think about sleeping in this thing, I almost burst out laughing. I managed to get into some sort of prone position with my legs out into the aisle although, I don't suppose that young man across from me appreciated two size 11 feet of some old guy resting on his back. Thank god I charged up the MP3 player the night before and loaded it up with some newer tunes (no, it wasn't Big Band music!) to listen to and get the droning of the diesel engine out of my head. Nice short nap until we got off the I-90.

As we all know, school buses are designed to not go over 55 mph, it's a physical impossibility and no matter how much one thinks positive thoughts to make it go 57 mph, it won't. Combine this with some sleet, fog, snow squalls and getting behind a snow plow along the way and one has to wonder, how the heck we managed to get to Cornell in time for the meet. Have you ever seen a coach have a "conniption?" It starts by frequent glances to their watch, then followed by cell phone calls to fellow coaches who are there and asking them if they can somehow get the meet organizers to delay the beginning of the first event. Finally, fast pacing back and forth in the bus and large sighs to persuade the bus driver to abandon all sense of safety and hurry to make up lost time. None of these ploys worked. Well, we did get there in time and for the kids who had to compete in the 3000m and 3200m races, they managed to perform well despite not getting a chance to warm up properly.

Once inside, it was a minefield of bodies all along the outsides of the track and countless more warming up on the backstretch of the track. It was a stark comparison to the order imposed during the State Championships. Once I had my bearings set, I tiptoed with camera in hand through the layers of student bodies, pillows, sleeping bags, luggage and I think the proverbial kitchen sink to get to the infield of the track. This was going to be a long day!

The day moved along as well as could be expected with countless heats of the 55m, 300m and 600m and multiple flights in the long, triple, and high jumps as well as an endless stream of pole vaulters. It was like a tsunami of bodies that kept coming down the track or runway. Some delays were to be expected but it wasn't so much the delays themselves that wore on you but the sheer throngs of kids making their way to the staging area or warming up on the backstretch EVEN during the distance races! Some competitors were interfered with by some one warming up but no official protests seemed to have been logged. This definitely proved that track & field is a contact sport.

The competition was interesting in that it obviously wasn't all Section 6 schools competing. It was a nice taste to see how our kids competed against other parts of the state and overall, we have our strengths and come early March, our kids should be peaking. I think the 1000m to 3000m races for both boys and girls will be the most interesting to watch at this year's States given where our kids placed at the STI and the quality of kids back home that didn't compete this weekend.

Well, once the meet ended at 7 P.M., everyone boarded the buses for the drive back, although, the coaches planned to stop and get some food before getting back on the road. We got on to the main "fast food" drag and settled on Burger King (belch) as it did not have a bus from another school parked in its lot. You should have seen the look on the BK manager and his two workers faces as two school buses unloaded and a hoard of hungry kids stormed the counter. I took a seat to watch this carnage unfold as countless questions were fielded by the BK associate. Really, what kind of questions does one ask when the menu is right over your head and it's all spelled out for you? C'mon, just order the value meal of your choice and get on with it already! Forty

five minutes later, we got back on the buses. I felt bad for the drivers as the aroma of fries and burgers wafted through the inside of the bus.

The ride home was less eventful than the ride there other than the inability to see out of the windows because of the frozen condensation and the high backed seats. Unless you lean out into the aisle, there's no way to see out the front window, not that there was anything to see at night. Again, the atmosphere in the bus was quiet as most if not all the kids dozed off. It's uncanny how when we got near the school everyone seemed to wake up, get their cell phone out and call their parents for the ride home. Geez, how did we manage back in our day without cell phones to call our parents. Did our parents have a better sense of timing...knowing the approximate time we would get home or was it their undying patience to sit in a school parking lot for an hour because they misjudged the arrival. Now that I think of it, we were the ones who had the patience because when we got back, we all ran to the pay phone (remember those?) and called our parents to tell them we were back.

Some things I'll take away from this trip, first, I envy the coaches for their patience, organization and demeanor for doing this week after week regardless of the length of the trip. Secondly, to the kids who were quite well mannered during the trip (although you were asleep most of the time) and polite. Third, to the bus drivers...how do you do this? Finally, I think I'll drive myself from now on. Must be a control thing knowing that you can come and go when you want, eat at a restaurant with wait staff, and actually drive 70 mph!