

Mark Arax: A question of destiny, an answer found in the fields of McFarland



The first time I saw the trailer for the new movie “McFarland, USA,” I couldn’t help thinking that was my story once – the coach, his high school runners, the fields, the improbable string of California state championships. It was a story that came to me by happenstance when I went to the town of McFarland on a summer day in 1997 looking for one thing and found another.

The movie isn’t based on my story. My story ended with a question of destiny posed by one of the boys. His name was Jose Perezchica, and I have never forgotten his face, the face of rural Zacatecas or how I left him on a winter day in the fields.

I have thought about him often in the years since, and that slice of the movie, myth or not, made his question urgent

again. So I decided to return to McFarland to try to find him, and the answer.

Back then, I was a journalist covering the middle of California for the Los Angeles Times, and McFarland, on the far side of Kern County, was part of my beat. The town made your avoidance of it easy. Highway 99 cut straight through its center, the “heartbeat of agriculture,” its weary sign proclaimed. The small squat village, its east side and west side with no means to meet, rose up out of vineyards and almond orchards and a dairy that smelled all the way to Bakersfield.

It was a place both in plain view and of a hidden zone, where children worked alongside their fathers and mothers deep in the fields picking the endless bounty of the San Joaquin Valley even as its poverty, forever too, hemmed in their lives. Who knew that in such a place the boys could run?

That August day, harvest’s brutal tail end, I knocked on the door of the city manager. I had come to do a follow-up story about the children of farm workers who had died in clusters from rare forms of cancer. For years, government scientists had tested the town’s soil and water to figure out if pesticides and herbicides were to blame. No reason, other than the quirk of coincidence, was ever found.

The city manager, a leftover from white Okie McFarland, trying to locate his footing in another peoples’ migration, had grown tired of the reporters.

“You, too?” he asked.

There’d be no glory, he insisted, in adding one more newspaper story to the long list of newspaper stories about the cancer mystery. “Why not a story that’s never been told?” he wondered. “A positive story?”

He drove me to the high school blacktop. There, on the gym wall, the great state of California appeared in one painted silhouette after the other. Six silhouettes in all. Each one a state championship, the championships dating back to 1987, a record unmatched by any high school in any sport in California.

“You wanna meet the coach? He lives just around the corner.”

The sun was setting, and the fields beyond the subdivision were quiet. He pulled up to a tiny, beat-up cottage where the boys were huddled under a messy chinaberry tree.

“As you can see, they’re all Mexicans. But the coach is white.”

“What’s his name?”

“White. Jim White.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

There in the 103-degree shade were two boys named Jose, each battling the other to be the best runner on the best team in the state, and Miguel and Rudy and Cookie, and runners from previous years who were now prison guards and school teachers, and then out came Coach White, aka Blanco, standing 6-feet-1 and looking like a young Clint Eastwood, only more handsome.

“How long we running today, White?” one boy asked.

The coach was seated atop a worn bicycle, his rickety ride through the fields, and smiled a wicked smile. “Until I get tired,” he said.

He pointed to an extra bicycle in the garage, and I hopped on. They ran past the alfalfa and the Holstein dairy and cut through the almond trees, first a jog and then a sprint. One mile, two miles, four, six, eight and 10. Over the next four months, through summer heat and winter fog, on the road to the state championship meet in late November, I kept

pedaling.

That the town saw them as redeemers, of the cancer cluster and more, only allowed me to dig deeper into a Valley where bounty and poverty sat so comfortably side by side. Epic forces had brought the boys and their parents to their knees by day. Another force, just as compelling, had put them in running shoes in the same fields by night.

“Follow them to the finish line” is what I recall my editor, Donna Wares, telling me.

A journalist never really is a fly on the wall. What you see is what they let you see. But four months is enough time to become familiar. You can catch the best of a man, and a little of his worst. You see his capacity for love and for meanness. You see what he gives to the boys – and it is plenty – and the good deal he takes in return. You see his wife baking sheets of cookies and feeding them to the boys after each meet. “These are our boys,” she tells you in her cluttered living room.

Across town, Jose Perezchica, 17, rose from his bed, a folding metal lawn chair, at 4:30 in the morning. He wrung out the night from his powerful 5-foot-7-inch frame, his lean runner’s legs. He put on a frayed long-sleeve shirt, jeans and a red-and-black hat embroidered with five state championships and drove in darkness to a vineyard.

He was the team’s top runner, “Indio,” they called him, because he wore the indigenous face of Zacatecas, the Mexican state where boys were born to run. But now he struggled to learn English and graduate from high school.

Kneeling in the powdery loam, he parted the vine like a curtain and stepped inside. He flicked the curved blade and the green-amber bunches dropped in a tub at his feet. Tub full, he spread the grapes on brown butcher paper to bake in the sun. It took the Valley sun 16 days to blister a grape into a raisin. It took him a minute and 20 seconds to make one tray. He just made 17 cents.

Eight hours later, back at home, he put on his shorts and running shoes. He carried the same question all the boys carried: Where would his last high school race end – footsteps in or out of the fields?

I followed him to the starting line at the state championships in late November. He took off too fast. Up and down the hilly course, he struggled as he never struggled all season. His face twisted in pain, he dropped to seventh place. Meet to meet, his teammates had used his unfaltering legs to nudge their pace. Now, taking his cue, they lagged far behind. The homestretch offered no McFarland miracles. Not this year. Blanco’s boys, their combined placements, finished fourth.

On the bus ride back, the coach couldn’t find any words of comfort. They stopped to eat, but Jose wasn’t hungry. He wasn’t sure about school. He wasn’t sure about ever running again. He tried to sleep, but the race wouldn’t leave him. In the morning, he put on his shoes and found himself at the edge of town. It was raining and he took off down the muddy row, almond tree after almond tree, and he kept running until it hurt no more.

He looked to the road ahead of him. Next week, he thought, would bring another race against some of the same top runners, and after that would be track season and after that the summer harvest, and after that, he didn’t know.

The story made the front page of the L.A. Times. Donations poured in from readers – scholarships and new running shoes and tens of thousands of dollars for White’s running club. One movie company and then another optioned the story. None got it right. One of the screenplays opened with gunfire and the boys rising out of strawberry fields. The coach was a convenience with the last name “Miller.”

It took 18 years but a Disney movie – Kevin Costner starring as Jim White – is now showing on the big screen. Here’s a case where the real-life character looks more like the movie star than the movie star. I’ve yet to see it, but the reviews are encouraging. Of course, I can understand Disney picking the year it did, 1987, to tell its story. That season ended in White’s first title, and many of the boys found ways to break free of the fields and lead middle-class lives.

But what about Jose?

I knew when I went looking for him I was looking for the 35-year-old man, not the boy. But the boy's face is all I had. As it happened, I found him almost right where I had left him. He was a proud farmworker who had spent the summer and fall lugging 750 boxes of grapes a day for the pay of 16 cents a box.

His parents, he explained in English, had returned to Zacatecas after 40 years in the U.S. Jose himself had moved into a new fancy subdivision built on farmland. But he and his neighbors, blue collar like him, were renters. The original homeowners had left in droves soon after their fences went up, swindled by the lenders of subprime mortgages.

He invited me inside. The place was perfect. His wife and three young sons were perfect. Ribbons and trophies, theirs and his, adorned the room. Jose had kept running. In fact, he was among the fastest half-marathoners his age in California. If I chose to stick around, he said, there'd be a gathering late that afternoon. He and the new and old boys of the cross-country program, champions and near champions, would be running, and Coach White, who comes down from his mountain home three days a week to train them, would be pedaling right behind across the fields.

Mark Arax, author of "West of the West," is working on a book about California's water wars to be published by Knopf.