

On Mr. John Surguy

As a freshman recently arrived from Puerto Rico via New York, I was lost when I first set foot in the halls of ACS Hillingdon. The new culture that enveloped me after landing at Heathrow in Pan Am's Clipper Maid of the Seas (later doomed as Flight 103) was marked by a totally different accent. Signs for what to me were "exits" read "Way Out," and my sun-browned legs moved fast in the English rain.

Mr. Surguy urged me to join cross country soon after meeting me. I soon learned it was hard to say no to this man.

"Can you house?" Mr. Surguy could be heard asking other student-athletes that first semester amid the ACS Hillingdon corridors. He was perpetually trying to accommodate other teams visiting for various international meets in late-1980s London. The flash of his sly smile, and a chiseled jaw framed by his trademark popped-collar polo shirt were at once both charming and demanding.

To me, his persuasive refrain became, "Alex, will you run for us?"

Mr. Surguy didn't say how rigorous the cross country practices and meets would be. Soon, however, I found myself on brisk, multi-mile runs through ACS' leafy neighborhoods, the rattle of the Metropolitan line never far behind.

At the end of a long week, I was dragging at the back of the pack. The first floor of Hillingdon Court mansion had a bracing drinking fountain. I trailed off and stood back, hands on my hips while my fellow runners pounded the pavement ahead, unaware that I had cut a corner down a side street back to campus. I'd catch up with the crew next week, if only I could get a drink now. The cool air of the main room and the drinking fountain on the first floor didn't disappoint. Satiated after a rest, I walked home.

Owing to my father's new job the Ministry of Defence, we were living temporarily at the nearby and now-demolished Master Brewer Hotel until we found a more permanent home in Gerrards Cross. Every Friday night, my parents and I would dine in the hotel's main restaurant, where I would feast on Chicken Kiev, wondering if it was

safe to drink English milk so soon after the Chernobyl disaster.

To my shock, as I approached the restaurant, Mr. Surguy loomed at the entrance in his brilliant tracksuit and familiar erect pose.

“Lost on a long run, are we?” Mr. Surguy wasn’t happy. It was evening by this point.

Dumbfounded, I asked what he was doing there.

“We received a report that you had gone missing,” he said.

I was astonished. Here was the school’s vaunted athletic director concerned enough about a student’s after-hours whereabouts that he was out sleuthing for mine. He looked down and told me that cross country was also a team sport. I owed it to the others to tell them I was cutting my run short, he said. The message was clear: don’t do that again. Then he swiveled around and ducked into the pub adjoining the restaurant.

This was the sort of cheeky and personalized attention that was rare to find among American coaches, and the episode proved the following: I was now part of the ACS family and I’d better start behaving like it.

When dinner was over, I eyed Mr. Surguy finishing a pint at the pub. His trip wasn’t in vain, I thought.

A few years ago, I took my wife to visit ACS during a day-long layover en route to Warsaw to visit her family. I wanted to show her the site of that formative year in London, and see the idyllic setting the school still occupies. We were unannounced visitors, and it was a weekend. When we approached the guard shack so familiar to me, the lone guard declined to grant us unrestricted access to the grounds. As I clumsily pointed toward the playing fields, I strained to paint a picture for my wife from afar, pointing, gesturing and ultimately muttering Mr. Surguy’s name.

“You knew Mr. Surguy?” he asked.

“Absolutely, one of the biggest influences on me as a student here,” I said.

Via a two-way radio, the guard summoned someone from the maintenance staff. Several minutes later we were standing in the mansion's main hall, looking up at the ceiling. The maintenance man recounted the history of the building and a ghost rumored to still inhabit it. For a moment, the cooling fan from the drinking fountain of my youth spun on.

Mr. Surguy's spirit still powered the school, I thought. His name got us in. Now, as a middle-aged father with two boys of my own, I wished they could learn from Mr. Surguy. If given the chance, after all these years, I would take a seat next to him at the pub now, to compare notes about fatherhood and life lessons offered by sport.

He would see that I had found my way, no longer lost on a long run.

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