

Ugly Shot

By David Alan Armstrong

"It's not like you can add two feet to your personal best overnight, ya' know," Ron muttered to Tom. Students darted around the two standing in the middle of the hall like a churning stream divided by a tiny island. Chatter echoed off the concrete floors and metal lockers lining the hallway of the 900 building—the math and sciences torture chamber of Laketown High School.

"I don't need to add two feet. That Casper guy's record is a fluke." Tom raised his voice to be heard about the din. "Everyone knows he cheated to win his district meet. Oldest trick in the book. Drill a hole in the shot to lighten it up by a few ounces, then plug the hole so nobody notices." Just thinking about it got Tom's blood boiling. "He can't get away with that kind of crap at the SIF meet. They weigh your shot and mark it. You can't throw an unmarked shot, and you can't get a mark without the weigh-in. We'll see how that kid does tonight in a fair meet."

Ron flashed his famous grin, then frowned. "I also heard he cheated on the weight class. The Casper coach tipped the scales so he could compete as a JV."

Tom recognized two football jocks shouldering their way through the stream of students. "Hey, Bradford!" the bigger of the two boomed above the noise. "Good luck tonight."

"Yeah, do us proud, dude!" the other agreed, pumping his meaty fist in Tom's direction.

"Go, Lancers!" Tom responded.

"Dude, they know your name!" Ron exclaimed as the two seniors sauntered away.

Tom shrugged, but inside he beamed. Senior varsity guys knew his name, even though he was just a lowly junior varsity sophomore. Holy crap! His nerves ramped up another notch, and the churning in his stomach shifted gears. The whole school was watching him. He *had* to win this meet.

The crowd of rushing students thinned. Tom started toward the exit. He and Ron had fourth period lunch next.

"I even heard the kid from Casper High did something to his shoes," Ron said. Exactly the kind of dirty trick Tom expected from Casper. They dominated the state in practically every sport since he started paying attention in elementary school. The only schools that could compete were the parochial institutions. Private schools could recruit the best from all over the state. Casper High recruited, too. Everybody knew it or at least suspected it. A public school couldn't possibly have that many top athletes in its natural boundaries. Could they?

Tom shook his head. "What could a shot putter do to his shoes to make him throw better?"

"I don't know. Maybe put springs in 'em?" Ron grinned.

"I'd believe just about anything about Casper guys, but I'm not buying the spring thing. That's just stupid." The wheels started turning in Tom's head. "I suppose you could put more

weight into the shoe on your trailing foot, to create ballast to help hold you in the circle so you're less likely to fault. Now, that might make sense." Would a modification like that be legal? How much weight would he need to put into his shoe to make a difference? Something to think about.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Whatever." The two friends emerged from the dark building into the bright sun of a late spring morning. Tom pulled shades from his backpack and slipped them on. Ron turned towards the cafeteria. Tom paused. "We gonna' get lunch, or what?" Ron asked.

"I'm skipping lunch. I've got something I want to do." Tom worried more about the state track meet tonight than he let on. He hardly slept last night. His stomach churned as visions of the podium swirled around his head. When he got up, the thought of breakfast made him sick.

Two weeks ago, the Casper shot putter recorded the best JV score of the season for any school in the state—fifty-five feet, two inches. Cheating? Maybe, maybe not. Tom won the JV championship for the Fremont Unified District that same day. A different meet, of course. Fifty-three feet, eleven inches—his personal best. That winning throw had been something of a fluke in its own right.

Prior to the district finals, his best throw with the twelve-pound shot had been fifty-two feet. Tom had gotten really psyched up for that championship meet. He had been nervous all day, edgy, skipped breakfast and lunch, and had butterflies in his stomach. When the five-school meet started, he couldn't stand still.

He won his qualifying heat with a fifty-two-foot toss. In the final heat, a kid from Wilson High threw a fifty-three-footer. Tom hit around fifty-two feet his first two throws. The Wilson guy scratched on his third throw, so Tom knew he had to beat fifty-three feet to win.

Something happened when he entered the ring for his final throw. He felt different. Nerves fired in rhythm through his body. Tom went through his standard crouch and wind up. When he whirled across the circle, he planted his right toe differently—the whole sequence was a blur of motion. When he uncoiled his frame, extended his arm, and released the iron shot, the ball seemed to fly through the air under its own power. It sailed on and on. He expected to hear the shot thud into the grass, but it kept going.

Tom's whole body filled with lightness, like he could float away. His shot had never traveled so far or taken so long to hit the ground. The tape measure was brought out and the judge called out "fifty-three eleven." A bona fide miracle! He beat his previous PR by almost two feet! No one else in that final round could touch him. He took home the gold. The Press-Telegram sports page showed Tom standing on top of the podium looking down at the medal hanging around his neck. His dad framed the photo.

As district JV champion, his spot in the State Interscholastic Federation meet was assured. In the two weeks since his triumphal performance at the district meet, he had not been able to replicate his winning distance. Day after day he practiced. He hit fifty-three feet with almost every throw, but no better. To beat the Casper kid in a fair match, he needed to throw fifty-four feet—assuming the jerk hadn't come up with some other way to cheat his way to the podium.

While Tom lay awake last night, he devised two strategies to give himself the best edge. First, he needed to be nervous like at the district meet. "All that nervous adrenaline was the key

to your extra distance,” Coach Brown had said. Rather than try to calm his nerves today, he would let the adrenaline run until he was exploding with it.

Second, make sure his shot was *exactly* twelve pounds. It couldn’t be under twelve pounds, of course, or it would be disqualified at the weigh-in, and he would have to use someone else’s shot. That would never do. Once a putter gets used to his shot, he would be uncomfortable using any other. The balance, the weight, the shape, the feel of the surface—it all made a difference.

On the other hand, if his shot was overweight, by even an ounce or two, it could mean the difference of several inches. While he was using the same shot he had thrown fifty-three eleven, it still might be heavier than the minimum requirement. He just needed to know.

“You aren’t going to eat lunch on meet day?” Ron squinted at Tom. “You think that’s a good idea?”

“Nah, eating is overrated,” Tom joked. Volcanic stomach acid testified that part one of his plan was already in full swing.

Ron’s grin reappeared. “Oh, yeah, I think I read that on the internet somewhere, where all truth is expounded. So, seriously, what’re you going to do?”

Tom looked around to see if anyone was listening, like he was hatching some devious plan. “I’m going to weigh my shot. I want to make sure it’s not over the limit.”

“What do ya’ mean?” Ron said. “A shot’s a shot. They all weigh the same, right?”

“I don’t know,” Tom replied. “I just want to make sure I’m not giving away any spare ounces. This meet is important.”

“No duh! It’s like the state championship. I’m going too, ya’ know.”

“Yeah, I know. You would want all the hurdles to be exactly the same regulation height, wouldn’t you? You don’t want your hurdles a half-inch higher than the other guys. I just want to make sure my shot is the regulation weight.”

“Okay, makes sense. So how are you gonna check the weight?”

“Put it on a scale, of course.” Tom rolled his eyes, just like when his little brother asked him a stupid question.

“Where’re you hidin’ a scale?” Ron asked.

“I don’t have a scale. But I know who does. The grocery store.” Tom raised his eyebrows in triumph.

“You mean Vons?”

“Yeah. Do you know of a closer store?”

“No, I guess not,” Ron shrugged.

“So, I’m going to grab my shot and take it to the store and get the cashier to weigh it. The store scales are regulated by law, so they have to be right on.”

“Okay if I come along?” Ron asked.

“Sure, I guess. But what about your lunch?”

“I heard from a wise man that eating is overrated.” The familiar grin popped out on Ron’s face. “Besides, I carb loaded last night, and Mom got up early and fixed me a big breakfast. I can do without if you can.”

“Let’s hit the road, then. I want to be back by fifth period English.”

They walked across campus to the gym. On the way to the locker room, they passed by Coach Brown’s office. He was sitting behind his desk and looked up as the boys walked by the open door.

“Bradford! Harley!” the coach’s deep voice boomed.

Guilt shot through Tom like a photon torpedo. He had nothing to be guilty about, did he? Swallowing the feeling, he ducked his head around the doorframe.

“Hey, Coach,” he said.

Ron followed with a goofy backwards moonwalk until he was standing in the doorway.

“Bradford, good luck tonight. I’m looking for great things from you.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Tom responded. His conscience relaxed, but his stomach tightened.

“You, too, Harley. Run a good race, son.”

“Yes, sir.” Ron snapped a salute.

Coach waved him away. “Get out of here. No workouts today. Bus leaves at four-thirty. Don’t be late.”

“Right, Coach,” Tom said. Coach Brown was a good man, tough when guys mouthed off, but helpful and supportive when they listened. Tom appreciated what he had learned from Coach.

They hurried to Tom’s locker, retrieved the metal ball, then went out the back door so they wouldn’t have to pass Coach’s office again. Since neither were allowed to drive to school, they walked the four blocks to the Vons grocery store on Woodruff Avenue. By the time they arrived, twelve pounds of iron shot felt like twenty. Tom’s arm and wrist ached. Only one checkout line was open, so the two boys stood behind an elderly woman with a small cart.

Stepping forward, Tom carefully placed the shot on the produce scale. It started to roll. He caught and twisted it a couple times.. When it stopped moving, he removed his hands and looked up at the cashier. “Ingredients for life” in bold white letters stretched across the woman’s dark red t-shirt. Her ample endowments supported a name tag that read “Connie.” The first thought on Tom’s mind was, “Great add for breast milk.” He wanted to share the joke with Ron but controlled the urge. Smiling at Connie, he forced his eyes to her face, so they didn’t wander down to her shirt.

“What do you want?” Connie asked, eyeing the shot.

“We’re not buying anything,” Tom explained. “We just want to weigh this shot.”

“A shot?” she asked.

“The ball. It’s called a shot. I need to know what it weighs.”

“You’re not buying anything?”

“No, ma’am,” Ron jumped in. “We just want to know if my friend’s shot put weighs twelve pounds.”

“Is that what that thing is? You can’t put that dirty thing on my scale. People put their food there!” She waved her hands at the shot like she could shoo it away.

"It's not dirty," Ron countered. "It's touched the same ground that all those vegetables grow in. And besides, everybody puts their stuff in plastic baggies anyway. So, can you just tell us how much it weighs?"

Muttering, Connie shook her head. She tapped a button on the register, and the display screen showed "12.2 lbs."

Two tenths of a pound overweight. Tom did the math in his head. Just as he feared. Three ounces too much. That could be taking six inches off his distance, maybe more.

Tom lifted the shot from the scale. Ron pretended to dust and blow off the shiny surface.

Connie huffed and rolled her eyes. "You kids get outta here! Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

Outside the store Tom stood, turning the shot over and over in his hands. Three ounces. How could he shed three ounces from a solid metal ball? Drill it out? That was technically illegal, even if the weight was still accurate. And it would probably throw off the balance. Besides, he did not have a drill.

Ron watched while Tom's wheels turned. "Can you get a new one?" he asked.

Tom considered that. "Coach said at the beginning of the season he had just enough for each putter. I don't want to use anyone else's. This one is broken in for my hand. I don't know what else to do. I'm going to lose to that chump from Casper because of three extra ounces." He sighed, turning the sphere over again. Well, he couldn't wish the extra metal away. He would just have to live with it.

Ron's grin broke across his face. "I got an idea."

"What?" Tom asked. It paid to be skeptical when Ron had an idea. It usually got them in trouble. More often it got Tom into trouble.

"You may not like this." Ron paused. "No, never mind."

"What?" Now Tom was curious. Ron had reeled him in more than once with that hook, but he fell for it every time.

"Well, if you gotta know, I was thinkin', we could grind the weight off."

"What?" Tom wasn't sure he heard right, or actually, he knew he had heard right but couldn't imagine what his friend intended.

"Listen." Ron began with a measure of enthusiasm. "We could put this thing on the metal grinder in the auto shop class. Take just a little off the surface all around. Just enough to lighten it up."

"That sounds crazy to me. Besides, I don't know anything about grinding."

"Dude, I had shop class last semester. I watched the seniors run the grinder all the time. Piece of cake."

It would sure be great to get those three ounces off. "You didn't actually run the grinder yourself?"

Ron shrugged. "Nah, but how hard can it be? The machine does all the work. All I gotta do is hold the ball and turn it."

The idea sank in. "How long would it take?"

“Five minutes, tops.”

“And you can get into the room?”

“Sure. It’s a public school, right? And I’m the public. Besides, I know Mr. Gardner. He’s cool.”

Tom turned the shot over one more time. His hands were getting tired of holding the thing, and his elbow had really started to ache. “Okay, fine,” he sighed. “You can do it in five minutes, let’s do it.”

They walked the four blocks back to campus, then to the shop building. Tom’s arms felt like they would fall off. His feet were sweating in his sneakers. He handed the shot to Ron, and his right arm tingled. Now free of the extra weight, it felt like a wing that wanted to fly

The door to the shop was open. Ron peeked inside, motioned for Tom to stay put. Just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of fourth period. The whole lunch hour had lapsed. The ratchet twisting the knot in the pit of Tom’s stomach tightened another notch. Fifth period English class would start in five minutes. Ron could never get in and out before class started.

Ron turned with a big smile. “Gardner’s gone. The place is empty. I’ll bet there’s no fifth period today. I’m goin’ in!”

Ron disappeared. Tom paced outside the door, feeling the tingling of taut nerves running up and down his spine. The twinge of a headache plinked behind his eyes. A horrific screech from inside the dark room nearly knocked him off his feet. It was like scratching iron fingernails on a steel blackboard. The noise echoed down the hallway. Tom jumped inside. A dark figure huddled over a workbench, sparks flying like fireworks. The screeching went on and on and on. Sparks landed angrily all around the floor.

Tom’s eyes grew wider. Too much, too much! He wanted to yell at Ron but knew his friend would never hear him over the din of the grinder. The machine must be scratching the heck out of the surface. What in the world was he thinking to let Ron talk him into this?

The grinding continued. *Every kid in the school is going to hear this. The principal himself will come running to investigate the racket.*

After an eternity, the screeching stopped, the sparks died away, the grinder purred into silence. Ron turned, holding the shot in gloved hands, the plexiglass shield still covering his face. He walked over to Tom and held up the ball. “It’s way hot, dude. Don’t touch it. Find something we can put it in.”

A pile of dirty shop rags lay on a bench. He spread out a stained blue swatch of material on the concrete floor. Ron gingerly set the shot on it. Tom lifted the corners of the rag and tugged gently on the weight. The shot came off the floor. The rags held. Equally important, they didn’t catch fire.

“Okay, you got it,” Ron said. He removed the gloves and face shield. Tom followed Ron through the door, holding the heavy bundle away from his leg so the greasy rag did not brush against his pants. Now the strain was on his shoulder as well as his elbow and wrist.

They walked around the back of the building, through the empty tennis courts, and stopped in the shade behind the stadium bleachers. His shoulder throbbing, Tom dropped the bundle on

the asphalt and unwrapped the cloth. His heart dropped. On the ground was a shiny, gun metal spheroid, generally round, with flat spots here and there. The once evenly textured surface was completely gone except for two tiny patches on opposite sides that reminded him of the fluff above his grandpa's ears. Holy crap!

"Dude, you gotta be kidding me! This is it? This is the best you could do?" Tom could only shake his head and stare at the pathetic ball. His shot was gone, and this thing was never going to work.

"I told you I had only *watched* 'em run the grinder. What did you expect?"

Tom ran his fingers through his hair. Sweat beaded on his scalp. "I don't know, but not this."

The two boys stood in silence for several moments. "What do ya' wanna do?" Ron asked.

Tom wiped his hand over his face. "I don't know if I can take this thing to the meet tonight. I don't know if it's even legal." His eyes were getting hot, and the color of his shirt chafed his sweaty neck. It was ruined. Everything was ruined.

Tom looked at Ron's face for the first time since he unwrapped his shot-gone-wrong and saw a mischievous grin. "Well, ya' said you wanted to shed three ounces. Shouldn't we at least find out if we accomplished that much. I mean, it's still a ball, and you can still throw it, right?"

"*Put* it, not *throw* it," Tom corrected with no attempt to hide his irritation.

"Whatever. If it weighs your precious twelve pounds, maybe you can still use it, and it's better if it's not too heavy, right?"

"'Better' isn't the word I'd use. But I suppose I could make it work. If it's right on the weight," Tom said.

"So," Ron continued, "fifth period is shot anyway. Let's hightail it back to the store and weigh it. At least you'll know, right?"

Tom had completely forgotten about his English class. He had never skipped a class a day in his life. His mom would kill him if she knew he'd ditched school. But these were desperate times. "Alright, let's get going." He wrapped the rag around the still-warm ball and picked it up.

"And keep an eye out for Coach. We don't want to explain if we don't have to," Ron warned.

The knot in Tom's stomach made another full twist. Ditching school, going off campus, and hiding from the coach. This was turning into a hell-of-a day! All because of that Casper kid. Maybe that guy would fall into a hole or get run over by a bus or drop the shot on his foot. Tom needed a miracle.

Connie stood at the check stand when Tom and Ron entered the store. She was busy and didn't notice them. They got in line behind a mom with a fussy toddler. The mom and kid finally checked out and Connie glanced up. When her eyes met Tom's, she narrowed her glare and pursed her lips. Squirming under the blaze of penetrating scrutiny, he stepped up, unwrapped the sphere, and started to place it on the scale in front of Connie.

"Uh uh!" she grunted, shaking her head.

"I just need—" Tom began.

“You don’t need nothin’, young man! You’re not puttin’ that ugly, dirty, grimy thing on my scale again. You get that thing outta here!”

“But I have to know what it weighs,” Tom pleaded.

“Is this some kind of joke?” She started looking around. “Is there a hidden camera somewhere? Am I on TV?”

“No, ma’am,” Ron broke in. “Tom here is a shot putter for the Lancers, and the state meet is tonight, and he has to know if his shot is the regulation weight.” He flashed his grin.

Connie eyed the sphere in Tom’s hands. “That’s not the same ball you brought in here an hour ago.”

“Actually, it is,” Tom said. “We ground it down to shave off some excess weight. I just need to know if it’s legal now.” He reached out to place the ball on the scale.

“Uh uh!” Connie intoned again. “This is a store, not a weigh station. We sell stuff, you buy stuff.” Tom conjured up his best puppy dog face. Connie’s expression softened a little. “I don’t want no trouble with my supervisor. You guys aren’t even supposed to be in here.”

Ron grabbed a pack of chewing gum from the display rack next to the register. “You got a buck?” he asked Tom. Tom pulled two dollar bills from his front pocket. Ron grabbed the bills from his hand and put the gum and money on the counter. “We’re buying stuff,” he said.

Connie rolled her eyes and scanned the little package. Looking at the shot in Tom’s hands, she flicked her eyes from the ball to the scale and shrugged.

With a gentle hand, Tom placed the shot on the brushed chrome platform. Covered in uneven flat spots, the propensity to roll was gone. Connie punched a button, and the display blinked to life.

Tom’s heart sank as the red LED’s showed “11.8.” He looked at Ron, mouth open and eyes wide in a fixed stare. Holy crap!

Connie held out the receipt and the change for the gum. “You don’t look so good,” she said to Tom.

“I’m dead, that’s all,” Tom said. He retrieved the ugly, underweight shot from the scale and started to walk away.

“Hey, kid, your change.” Connie waved the receipt at him. Tom stuck out his hand, and she dropped the coins and the slip of paper into his palm. He shoved the wad into his pants pocket and turned again to leave.

“Don’t forget your gum,” she said. Tom grabbed the pack from the counter and dropped it into his shirt pocket.

“Don’t come back here! You understand me?” the cashier called out as the boys headed for the exit.

On the sidewalk by the store entrance, Tom’s head hung limp. He stared at the polished ball in his hands. It may have been underweight, but it felt like fifty pounds.

“What am I going to do?” The words were for himself more than for Ron. “Holy crap!”

“Ya know,” Ron broke in with just the hint of a smile, “you say that a lot, right?”

Heat flared into Tom's face. "Yeah, well, you say 'right' a lot, too, ya know." Other words were flying through Tom's mind. He wanted to shout every curse he knew at the used-to-be friend with the always-goofy grin. This was all Ron's fault. He should never have trusted him in the machine shop. Ron never did anything right, he's just a skinny goofball with curly red hair and a nose for trouble. And now, Tom was in big trouble.

More than Ron's fault, this was the Casper kid's fault. He cheated to get on the JV team. He cheated with his drilled-out shot. This should be the biggest day of Tom's life, and that dumbass swindler was spoiling it. Tom should have been a shoo-in for the state JV title. But now, because he was worried about a con artist who shouldn't even be in the competition, he had let Ron ruin his shot, and he was going to let Coach down, the varsity guys, and worst of all, himself. The only way anyone would remember his name after this was just to laugh at him.

"Sorry," Ron said. "Maybe I messed up." And then the grin started. "But I know how to fix it."

"I don't want any more help," Tom spat.

"I know, but I'm telling ya, I can fix this."

Tom started the slow trudge across the parking lot towards campus without saying anything. Ron fell in step next to him.

"Really," Ron pleaded, "I know you're bummed. But listen, I can fix this. Your shot's a little light, right? So, we just add a little more weight to it. The auto shop has a welding gun. I can just weld some metal onto the shot, and it'll be perfect!" The brightness of his optimism pierced Tom's gloom like a bullet to the heart.

"You're kidding me. You can fix this screw-up with another screw-up? Do you even know how to use a welding gun?" Tom was tempted to drop the shot on Ron's foot and just walk away.

"Well, I watched. But dude, what've ya got to lose?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe my sanity, or my dignity?" Tom shot back.

Ron stopped in his tracks. "Hey, I said I was sorry. Let me try to make this right. What's the worst that could happen?"

Tom could think of a million things, all of which ended up the same way. He was out of the meet, and the Casper kid would take the title and walk away as smug as a bug.

"At least let me try," Ron pleaded.

"Fine!" Tom blurted in exasperation. "If you think you can fix this, here you go." He held out the shot and waited for Ron to put his hands under it. "I'm done carrying this thing. If you want to fix it, you can carry it."

"Okay, no problem," Ron said. He took the ball in his hands, and they resumed their march back to school. "Ya know, we left the shop rag back there."

"Who cares?" Tom responded sarcastically. "They can arrest me for littering. Serve me right."

Just moments after they arrived back on campus, the bell rang to end fifth period. "Mom's going to kill me if she finds out I ditched class, if I'm not already dead," Tom moaned.

“Nah, it’s no big deal. I skip classes all the time. Nothin’ ever happens,” Ron assured him. “But look on the bright side. You are about to miss sixth period as well. You’re hittin’ the daily double!”

“Oh, thanks,” Tom said. “It’s such an honor taking up a life of crime with you.”

“Dude, relax. It’ll all work out.”

The auto shop door was still open when they got there, but the room was not dark. Students streamed in. Tom stood across the hall, sidestepping until he could see inside. Mr. Gardner walked across the floor and stood next to a boy at a workbench. Another bell announced the official beginning of sixth period.

“Perfect!” Tom said. “There’s a class in there. What are you going to do now?”

Ron shifted the heavy ball from one hand to the other, his fingers tiring. Just then, a guy with scraggly dark hair and an old AC/DC t-shirt burst through the doors at the end of the hallway and sprinted for the shop door.

“Hey, Josh, ol’ buddy, come here,” Ron called out.

“No way, bro, I’m late,” the kid shot back.

“Dude, I need a favor,” Ron said. “It’ll just take a minute.”

Josh hesitated, but it was all Ron needed to make his pitch. He explained the dilemma and what needed to be done. Josh assured Tom and Ron he was an expert with the welding gun, having aced the first quiz already. Ron handed him the shot. Josh looked at it a moment, turned it over a couple of times, and shook his head.

“Sorry, bro. No way, Jose. I don’t know if I can get the weld to stick on this polished surface. Even if it sticks, I can’t make it perfectly smooth until it cools, and I can put it on the polisher. It’s a no go.”

Ron stuck his fingers into Tom’s shirt pocket and retrieved the pack of gum. “Does this help?” Josh sniffed it and shook his head. With a sigh, Ron reached his hand in his own pants pocket and pulled out a five-dollar bill. “Better?”

“Oh, man, you should have said so from the beginning. Done deal. No worries.” Josh snatched the gum and the bill from Ron’s hand and disappeared into the room. He returned to the open door ten minutes later with the shot wrapped in another grimy shop rag. Tom had the feeling he was handling dirty drug needles when he took it from Josh.

They went back to the spot under the bleachers. The shade had moved considerably since they had been there more than an hour earlier. They ducked in the shadows behind an empty concession stand to ensure Coach didn’t see them if he came out of the athletic building.

Tom could still feel some heat radiating through the blue rag as he unwrapped the shot. He had not imagined it could get worse, but it was. Perched on top of the ball was a glob of blackish gray metal that reminded him of a frozen pile of dog droppings. The round mass stood like a raised continent on a globe, about a quarter of inch high in the center, and splayed out roughly the size of Tom’s palm, the edges tapering in irregular borders. Tom could only stare, speechless, at the cancerous welt.

“Hmm,” Ron said, “interesting design. Not quite what I’d imagined. But ya get what ya pay for.”

Tom’s temper smoldered at Ron’s flippant words. His shotput career was going up in smoke, and his friend was making jokes. He hadn’t punched anybody since fourth grade, but if Ron said one more thing...

Luckily, Ron remained silent as they both looked at the shot.

Tom sighed. “Holy—” he began, but forced his mouth shut. “What am I going to do with this?”

Ron’s sheepish grin slowly lit his face. “I guess you’re gonna to throw, er, I mean, *put* the ugliest shot in the history of the world?”

Tom didn’t have the energy to respond. His stomach cramped. He could taste vomit in the back of his throat, and the headache behind his eyes was starting to throb. His arms felt like lead weights suspended from his shoulders, and his hands trembled involuntarily. Squatting on the ground, his quads started to ache, and he got a cramp in his right calf..

Ruined. Everything was ruined. Not only were his hopes of glory going down in flames, his perfect attendance record was gone. If this day could get any worse, he couldn’t imagine how.

He touched a finger to the cankerous blob. It was still warm but cool enough to be handled. He lifted the shot and hefted it in his right hand. Between the dull pain in his shoulder and his twitching fingers, he got no sense of whether the ball was too heavy or too light. It just felt wrong. He thought for a moment about making one more trip to the grocery store but couldn’t face the snippety cashier. He wasn’t sure he could carry the thing all that way again.

The post office? They had a scale, but it was twice as far as the store. Throw it in the dumpster? Then he would have no shot for the meet. He didn’t want to go to the meet anymore, so maybe it didn’t matter. The dumbass Casper kid could have his glory. Tom didn’t want to see the stupid smile on his ugly face.

Despite his morbid thoughts, he knew what he had to do. As much as he hated losing, the thought of having to explain to his parents and Coach why he quit was even worse. Humiliation was bad. Criticism and disapproval were worse. More than anything, he hated people thinking he was stupid. The only reason he would skip out on state finals was because he was stupid.

Tom looked at his watch. Less than ten minutes left in sixth period. He could see no point in trying to get to class now. As much as he wanted to ditch the ugly shot in his gym locker, so he didn’t have to carry it around, he didn’t want to risk bumping into Coach.

“I’m going home to get changed,” Tom said.

Ron’s grin faded. “Yeah, good idea. You’re lucky you live across the street. I’ve got my uniform in my locker. Guess I’ll just hang out here.”

“Sure,” Tom said. He bent over to pick up his shot. “I’ll be back by four-thirty for the bus.”

“K, see ya,” Ron said.

“Yeah, see ya.” Tom walked from beneath the bleachers and turned towards his house, the shot cradled in the crook of his left arm, his right arm dangling limply at his side. *Maybe the Casper kid will miss his bus?* A guy can still hope.

Tom opened the front door of his house. Maybe he could slip into his bedroom without being seen.

“Who’s there?”

Guess not. “Hi mom, it’s me.”

Mom walked from the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel, her brows furrowed with concern. “What are you doing home?”

Consumed with self-pity and the image of ‘Goliath of Casper’ standing on the podium holding a medal, Tom hadn’t considered an excuse for coming home early. “I, ah, well, you see—” and then a thought came to his rescue. “The state meet is tonight, remember? No track practice today. I have to get ready to go to the meet.” He twisted sideways to shield the shot from view as he closed the door.

I should break for my room, Tom thought. Instead, Mom advanced, her expression unchanged. “Yes, I remember the meet. In fact, your dad just called. A client insists on coming to the office tonight, so he doesn’t think he will make it to watch you. I’m sorry.”

Tom almost cheered but kept it in. “Oh, no big deal. It’s just another meet.”

“No, it’s not, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Right,” Tom said, and made another move towards his room.

Mom stepped in front of him. “I got a call from the school office just before your dad called. They wanted to know if you were home sick today. Apparently, you missed some classes?”

That didn’t take them long.

Her mouth was a firm, straight line. Her eyes fixed on his. He knew “the look.”

“Yeah, I had some stuff to do. Ron—you know Ron—he needed some help, and him and me needed to take care of some stuff.” It sounded totally lame. He regretted the words as they came out of his mouth. He should have thought this through before coming home.

“Yes, I know Ron. And it’s ‘he and I’ not ‘him and me.’ Apparently English was one of the classes you missed today. So, what about Ron?” Her eyes became more intense and challenging.

He started over, still grasping for something plausible. “Well, it was really me, I mean, I had stuff to do, and Ron was helping me.” He paused to take stock of “the look.” It was unchanged.

“Um, track stuff, to get ready for the meet. It just took longer than we thought.”

“I see. ‘Track stuff’ is more important than school?”

Unable to come up with anything better, he told his mom the truth and showed her the shot as evidence of his testimony. She looked at the misshapen ball and folded her arms, and at last, “the look” melted. Yet her voice was still stern. “We’ll talk tomorrow about skipping classes. That’s a grounding offense.” She reached out a finger and gently touched the shot’s swollen contusion. “That’s the ugliest thing I think I have ever seen,” she said.

He found his track uniform laid out on his bed, together with the red and silver warmup pants and jacket, “Fremont Unified School District” emblazoned in white letters across the back. This was the official uniform for the district. Tonight, he was not just a Lancer, he was a member of the FUSD, the all-district team. The district-issued tank top and shorts, which doubled as a basketball uniform in the winter, were also red and silver. The warmup pants zipped up the

outside of each leg about a third of the way. Not a bad outfit, just a little bit of class. Tom felt a bit better putting it on. He may have an ugly shot, but he looked cool.

He looked again at the ghastly shot nestled in his pillow. Had what's-his-name—Josh—welded enough iron to it to bring it up to regulation weight? Wow, what if it was still too light? Not only was it ugly, it might not even qualify. What would he do? Beg for a shot? The bile in his throat crept into his mouth. His head throbbed. After all this, he might not even get to compete. Holy crap!

Tom lay on his bed, put on his headphones, and hoped music might soothe his jangled nerves. It only irritated him more. He tossed the headphones aside and sat in stony silence, his thoughts whirring, head throbbing, shoulder aching, fingers twitching, and feet tingling like live wires were attached to his toes.

When the clock by his bed finally read 4:15 p.m., he donned the uniform and warm-up suit, picked up his shot, and walked toward the door. "See you later," he called.

"Good luck, sweetie," Mom's voice lilted from the kitchen. He hated being called 'sweetie'. Only babies were sweeties.

The yellow school bus idled in the auditorium parking lot. Tom stayed apart from his teammates. A few stood with parents, others in small groups. Tom spotted Ron but avoided his eye. Ron might recognize the thoughts of justifiable homicide written on Tom's face.

Coach Brown climbed from the bus and motioned the team to gather. "Huddle up!" Tom had heard that call many times, usually at the beginning of practice. He trudged over with the others to form a ragged circle around Coach. His teammates chanted, "Lancers! Lancers! Lancers!"

Coach motioned for silence, cleared his throat, and began. "Tonight, the guys you have competed against all season are now your teammates. You are not wearing your Lancer uniforms. These are district togs tonight. You will be running with the best of the best from our district team tonight, and against the best from all over the state. Do your best, each of you, and have a great time. But don't forget your team."

A senior started a low chant, "Freemont, Freemont!" Everyone picked it up. Tom was swept up in the cheer, and for a moment, he forgot about his ugly shot, and yelled with the rest, "Freemont!"

Coach pointed to the bus, and everyone swarmed aboard. The chanting continued until the bus left the parking lot. Jokes and laughter erupted all around. Twice on the two-hour ride to Cumberland High School in Green River Valley, Coach stood and reminded all to stay in their seats and keep it down, so they didn't distract the driver.

Just behind the driver, Tom sprawled across a bench seat, head down and eyes closed. He tried to conjure a vision of himself hurling the shot through the air to the amazed cheers of the crowd in the stands. It failed. All he could see was the ugly gray scar on the shot as it left his hand.

The sleepless night and the churning nerves caught up with him. He jolted awake when the bus bumped over the lip of the driveway to the parking lot behind the stadium. From his window, he saw in big, bold letters across the top of the bleachers, "Cumberland Wolves."

Tom was the last person off the bus, cradling his wounded shot in his left arm, sparing his right arm for the meet. His headache lessened, but his stomach churned and growled.

Trailing his team into the stadium, he spotted the officials' table beneath the striped canopies at the far end of the football field. He joined the line at the check-in table with athletes from all over the state. Some sported brightly colored nylon warm-up suits like his—various shades of green, red, yellow, blue, purple, brown. It looked like a parade of flags at the United Nations. Other guys wore simple gray cotton sweatshirts and sweatpants. A few had on raggedly old t-shirts and shorts.

He spotted a kid in line wearing a light blue warm-up jacket with "Casper" embroidered in white letters. This could be his Casper nemesis, since he had never actually seen the kid or even a picture. He had the broad shoulders of a shot putter, but otherwise he looked like just an ordinary high school kid—not even a jock, just a guy like everyone else on campus. He would know for sure, though, when the kid reached the table.

Tom drilled his eyes into the back of the Casper jacket. The kid wasn't any taller than Tom. He was not the muscle-bound brute Tom had imagined. One thing, though—he didn't slouch. He stood as if at attention for military inspection. He never turned his head, never spoke to anyone in line, just shuffled forward as the line moved.

When the guy in blue got to the table, Tom craned his neck to see. The kid handed a shot to the official. Tom was sure now, this was the Casper state record holder for the season, his unseen rival. What had Tom been so worried about? He let out a long, slow breath and focused on releasing the tension in his shoulders and neck. The taut muscles would not relax. After being tied in knots all day, it would take more than a simple breath to release them.

The official handed the shot back to the boy in blue, and a white paper sticker with the number 78 printed in bold, black type. Every competitor would get his own number tonight to affix to his uniform jersey. The boy's shot sported a streak of red paint, indicating it met regulations. At least tonight, Number 78 couldn't cheat with a hollowed-out shot. The kid marched away from the table.

Each athlete handed his implement to the official to be checked—javelins, shots, discuses (or was it disci, like cactus-cacti? Who knew? Who cared?) At last, Tom stood at the table. His left arm ached from holding the twelve-pound ball for so long. He was relieved when he held it out and a man with a big gut and tufts of gray hair lining his black baseball cap took it. The man in the hat looked at the shot for a long time, turned it over several times, and scratched the stubble on his chin. "That's the ugliest shot I have ever seen. What in the world happened to this thing?" he said without a trace of a smile.

The only response that popped into Tom's head and out his mouth was, "Escapee from a leprosy colony."

Still no smile. In fact, Tom could swear the man gave him "the look." He didn't even know men could generate a "mom look."

The man with the hat gestured to two other men at the table. They huddled together just out of earshot, each in turn handling the shot and shaking his head. Tom could feel the eyes of the

kids behind him drilling into his back with annoyed stares. The officials broke up, and the man with the hat set the shot on the scale. Tom held his breath. His temples felt that all too familiar throb.

The readout said 12.2. “You’re kidding!” Tom muttered under his breath. The shotput gods were playing a cruel joke. After all that effort, back and forth to the store, two trips to the auto shop, he was right back where he started—three ounces overweight. If earlier today he thought things couldn’t get worse, they just did.

“Well, this ugly piece of junk qualifies. Nothing in the rule book about how it looks as long as it’s round, metal, and the minimum weight.” The man dabbed red fingernail polish on the surface of the shot opposite the side with the welt. He pulled out a white sticker and wrote on a clipboard, then handed the sticker and another sheet of paper to Tom. His number was 103.

Tucking the papers under his arm, he lifted the shot from the scale and walked towards the middle of the field. If a hole had opened at the fifty-yard line and swallowed him whole, he would have been relieved.

Of course, no hole appeared, so he wandered to where the Fremont District athletes congregated. A few stretched and jumped, the rest sat on a big tarp and chatted. Tom stood to the side. He dropped his shot and looked at the schedule of events on the paper in his hand. The shot put section showed he would be in the third qualifying round, which didn’t start for nearly an hour.

He saw an empty bench at the far end of the stadium, past the track’s curve, near the shot put pit. Wandering over, he sat down. The iron ball was too heavy *and* ugly. Tom considered scraping off the welded metal. Banging it on the concrete curb that edged the track, he only chipped the cement. The glob was, well, welded on. He needed a hammer and a chisel, which he didn’t have. Even if he removed the glob, it would need to be reweighed. Then it might be too light.

Tom’s stomach flip-flopped. Bile rose in his throat. His headache returned with a vengeance. Sweat stuck to his hands, his arms felt like rubber, and his fingers twitched and trembled like they had a mind of their own. When he stood to walk, his knees wobbled.

He spotted Ron walking towards him but waved him away. He was in no mood for Ron’s typical jokes.

He glanced in the direction of the shot put ring. Guys warmed up, and then the first heat got underway. The Casper kid was in the third heat with Tom. He waited, paying little attention to the action. No light blue uniform appeared around the pit. Where was the Casper kid? Maybe he turned chicken and dropped out. Probably not. He was likely strutting somewhere, practicing his podium mount.

The second round wound up. A glance at the clock on the scoreboard showed it was time for Tom to go to the pit. The official at the ring was the same man who had weighed his shot. Tom checked in. The man shook his head and checked his clipboard. He showed the list to Tom and pointed at his number, 103. He was in fourth position. The last in the group was Number 78, the kid from Casper.

Tom stood in line to take his three obligatory warm-up tosses. When he stepped into the ring, he hefted the shot in his hand, searching for the balance spot. Resting it in the crook of his neck, he turned it over and over to find the proper setting where the bulge would not rub against his chin as he pushed the shot out. He decided on holding the sphere with the rough nodule in the palm of his hand. The shot still didn't feel right—too smooth under his fingers, the bulge pressing into his palm—but at least it was balanced and manageable.

Warmups ended and the heat began. The first three putters landed their shots. Each hit the turf around the fifty-foot stripe—respectable, but nothing to brag about. Besides, the first throw was always conservative just to ensure a measurable attempt. Tom knew he could beat those marks. He also knew those guys would beat their own marks in the next set. And the Casper kid, who had finally shown up, was still standing in the wings. Tom was tempted to blast out his absolute best attempt at the beginning. It might sow fear into the others. It might show he was the man to beat. Nevertheless, a little voice told him to follow the time-honored strategy. He determined to make a clean first throw.

On quivering knees and a stomach doing somersaults he lifted the shot above his head and slowly lowered it into position on his shoulder. Even with the weight of the shot to steady his hand, it trembled against his neck. He raised it, then brought it down into position. The trembling nerves racked every sinew in his body. He paused, and the judge cleared his throat. "We're waitin', son."

Tom crouched, wound up, twirled across the ring, pushed up with his right leg, and uncoiled his frame. He forced his momentum into his shoulder, through his arm and finally into his hand. He held back to stop himself from extending fully over the toe board. The shot left his hand, wobbled through the air, and thudded into the soft grass just shy of the fifty-foot line. He kept his balance, making sure he did not touch the top of the white toe board. Turning on his heel, he walked out the back of the circle.

The man with the hat picked up the end of the measuring tape and held it at the apex of the circle. The judge in the field pulled the other end of the tape taut and placed it at the edge of the divot the shot had made. "Forty-nine, nine," he called out. The man in the ring wrote the number on his clipboard.

Tom shook his head. He should have at least landed fifty feet.

The next three entered the circle in order and tossed out throws beyond the fifty-foot line. The last putter, the Casper kid, hit fifty-three five on his first throw—his *conservative* throw. How did he do that? He was quick across the circle, Tom had to give him that. Still, he didn't grunt or make any sound as he launched the shot. He just let it fly, and there it went.

Tom's nerves grew tauter, and puke burned the back of his throat. On his next trip to the ring, he struggled to keep his balance. The shot would not settle comfortably against his neck, his fingers throbbed, and his toes felt like they were jammed into too-small shoes. Again, the official cleared his throat as Tom froze in his crouched stance. He had to do better than fifty feet with this throw to even hope to place in the heat to make it to the final round.

He twirled through the ring and pushed the shot from under his chin with a giant grunt. The sphere arched high and sailed clear and free. This was easily a fifty-two-footer, he was sure of it. Just as the shot hit the ground, he twisted slightly over his right knee. With his right foot jammed against the raised toe board, he could not shift his weight to catch his balance. His momentum carried him over the board and outside the ring. “Scratch!” the official bellowed. The judge in the field dropped the tape and folded his arms.

The next three guys tossed their shots, all over fifty-three feet. To Tom’s horror, the Casper kid, the last one up in the second set, measured fifty-four feet two inches. Impossible! There was no freaking way that guy could put that far. Maybe the judge had mis-measured? Tom walked along the boundary line of the pie-shaped pit to get a better look at the spot where the judge was standing. Sure enough, the man was standing on the fifty-five-foot chalk line, and the shot was sitting right in front of him. The kid in blue marched out to retrieve his shot, his face expressionless, almost frozen. His eyes never left the ground. As he picked up the iron ball, the official said something to him that Tom couldn’t hear, but he assumed it was a compliment. The kid didn’t look up or respond. He just marched off to the side of the field and headed back to the circle. He was a weird duck, that was for sure.

They had one more throw to finish the heat and determine who would go into the final round. Tom needed only to place fourth to move on. He had to break fifty-three feet to even have a chance. Though the evening air was cool, he dripped in his sweat suit. He stripped it off and paced behind the waiting area, glancing at the backs of the competitors. One guy shook his arms to loosen his shoulders, another stretched his neck from side to side, another shifted from one leg to the other and flexed his knees. The Casper kid stood like stone, confident, relaxed, powerful, ready.

By contrast, every muscle in Tom’s body trembled and ached from nerves that had torn at him for hours. No adrenaline pulsed through his veins. He had used it all up. No excitement, just heart-pounding fear. He had to make the best throw of his life and beat his personal best by more than a foot, just to advance.

With one or two clean throws in the books, each putter knew he could go all out on the last attempt. Tom could feel the excitement in the group. No one spoke. No one even looked each other in the eye. Each glanced sideways from time to time at the others standing in line—all except the Casper kid, who just stared out at the field.

The putters entered the circle in turn, fierce determination evident on their faces. With roars and bellows, they hurled their shots into the air. Fifty-two five. Fifty-one eleven. Fifty-one nine. Tom could not remember every measurement of every putter, but he knew he had to break fifty-three feet.

The judge with the hat looked at his clipboard. “Number 103. You’re up!” Tom’s fate rested in his own hands as he picked up his shot. Holding the sphere in his left hand, he shifted it until the ugly boil stared him in the eyes. He dropped it into his right hand, so the blemish rested in his palm. With all his heart, he wished the lump would vanish, the pebbly surface would return, that his old shot would return.

He stepped into the circle, forcing his mind to focus on his setup routine. The boil pressing into his palm filled his head. The shot weighed fifty pounds. He pressed it above his head before settling it against his neck. Sweat dampened his hands. His feet tingled. His head throbbed. It all came down to this. It had to be his best, no matter how he felt.

Drawing in one last, deep breath, he crouched, balanced, and began his spinning journey across the circle. Relying on instinct and muscle memory, he pushed up, uncoiled, and sent every nerve screaming into his shoulder, arm, wrist, hand, and fingers. The air burst from his lungs in a great roar of exertion. Just as his arm reached its full extension, the smooth shot slipped between his fingers and dropped like a wounded duck fifteen feet in front of him. Holy crap! You're kidding me! This isn't happening!

Poised on his right foot, body twisted half around, sharp pain shooting up his arm from his bent fingers, Tom stared at the lump of metal partially buried in the grass. The official by the circle let out a low groan. The judge in the field bent to pick up the measuring tape. The only honorable thing to do was to intentionally scratch to avoid the embarrassment of hearing the field judge call out his pathetic score. Tom straightened up, shook his head, and deliberately put his left toe on the top of the board. "Scratch!" the man with the hat and clipboard called out with a sigh of relief.

Tom saw no point in waiting around for the rest of the guys to throw. He was clearly not in the top four and was not going into the final round. He walked out of the circle, pulled on his sweats, and started heading for the stadium exit.

"Hey!" A deep voice called behind him. "Aren't you gonna pick up your shot, son?"

"Nah, you keep it!" Tom growled as he kept walking.

"It's not mine to keep," the voice said, a little softer. "Rules say every putter has to retrieve his shot from the field. Come get it."

Tom stopped and turned, trying to blink back hot tears. "To hell with the rules! I've lost, what's the point?"

The man with the hat walked toward Tom, closing the gap, and lowering his voice. "You compete, you do your best, you obey the rules, and you hold your head up. That's what an athlete does. Now, do your job."

"But I don't want that piece of junk." Tom spat out the words as heat rose from his neck into his face. He stared at the ground, afraid to meet the man's eyes, bitterness eating his guts.

"Well, maybe you don't want it right now. But I'd hang onto it if I were you. I think you've got some things to learn from that shot."

"Yeah, like I've learned I'm no shot putter, that's for sure."

"I'm not talking about shot put lessons. You take that thing home and think about it. Now, go get it so the next guy can take his turn."

Tom's face burned as he skulked back through the pit. Taking the few steps to where his shot lay, he picked it up and turned to walk back to the circle. The eyes of every kid in line drilled into him, their contempt filling his head, their impatience obvious in their postures and gestures.

Only one guy didn't look at him. The Casper kid kept his eyes straight ahead, focused on the log barrier at the far edge of the field, tall, relaxed, indifferent, almost majestic.

That arrogant piece of trash! Tom thought. *He knows he's got the meet sewed up, and his only real competition is walking off the field. He doesn't even have to take his last throw. Just stand there and smirk at the rest of us losers. He thinks he's big stuff. Well, who cares? Let him have his moment of glory. Look at him marching around like a wooden soldier, not looking at anybody, not looking at me!* Hatred tasted like vomit in Tom's mouth. *The kid's rich dad is probably waiting for him in his Porsche. Or he's got some hot babe sitting up in the stands just waiting to tell him how amazing he is. Anyone can be great when he gets all the breaks.* He stomped from the pit and grabbed his red warmup suit. Slamming the shot into the grass, he jerked on the pants and shoved his arms into the sleeves of the jacket. The stories he told himself did not ease the disappointment.

No point in standing around to watch the big finale. Ugly shot in hand, Tom headed towards the stadium tunnel leading to the locker room under the stands. He wanted to get off the field, away from the people in the stands, away from the athletes on the track. The tunnel was dark, quiet, isolated. Just inside the gloom of the tunnel he spied a bench. Perfect. He dropped the shot on the floor and stretched out on the bench. His body went limp, wrung out, drained. He closed his eyes and let the silence envelope him. Numbness seeped into his head.

He must have dozed when he heard a voice rise out of his mind's darkness, then felt a jolt as if the bench had been kicked. Tom opened his eyes to see a dark silhouette framed by the light flooding through the tunnel's mouth. "Found you!" Ron's voice echoed off the cement walls. Tom inched himself into a sitting position, and Ron plopped down next to him.

"Dude, Coach and me were looking for you everywhere. You hiding out down here?"

"Yeah."

"What've you been doing? Why weren't you out on the field with the rest of us?"

"Didn't figure anyone would miss me," Tom answered

"So, you don't know?"

"Know what?" Tom asked warily.

"The results."

"Oh, I know the results all right. You don't need to rub it in."

Ron shook his head slowly. "I don't get you. I'm talking about the *team* results. We placed third in the meet. We're third in the whole freakin' state, dude! We got medals!" Excitement filled his voice.

"Yeah, well, no thanks to me."

Ron's expression turned serious. "Yeah, I heard. You didn't even get into the final round. Bummer, dude."

Tom hunched over and put his aching head in his hands. "Did you hear my final score?"

"Nope, but who cares? We were here, we saw the best, we got a team medal, we're third in state. A bunch of the guys won their races. We were placing all over the place. It was awesome!"

Ron's cheery, flippant attitude drove Tom deeper into despair. "Yeah, well, I didn't place. It was the worst I've done all season." He waited for Ron's next "who cares" response, but he got only silence, so he let go with his deepest hurt. "I'm an idiot, and now everyone knows it. Come Monday, everyone in school will know it. My parents will know it. Coach knows it. I'm thinking maybe I'll transfer to another school." Still no reply from Ron, so he went to the bottom of his pit. "That jerk from Casper psyched me out. All the posing and staring. Gave me the creeps. He was so smug, so sure, so freaking, I don't know, weird. He weirded me out. I let him get to me. I don't know how he could put the shot so far. He's not that strong, not that big. Somehow, he cheated. I just know it. He cheated, and that's all there is to it."

Finally out of steam, Tom slumped against the back of the bench and let his head rest against the cool concrete wall. He glanced at Ron, who was hunched over and looking at his hands. Ron finally spoke, "So, are you gonna ask me how I did?"

Tom didn't really care how Ron or anyone else did. His personal universe was shattered, and no other universe existed as far as he was concerned. Still, it would be polite to ask. "So, how did you do?"

Ron shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter." He slowly pulled a silver medallion out of his pocket. "Second in the two-twenty hurdles, that's all." His glum expression broke into an irrepressible grin. "Can you believe it?"

"Nope," Tom shot back. Ron, the goof-off, got second, and Tom, the guy who worked his butt off all season, got nothing. Where's the justice?

Ron shoved the medal back into his pocket, and the grin faded. Tom muttered an empty "Congrats."

"Well, don't stroke out with too much praise. No big deal," Ron said as he stood. "See ya later."

Tom glanced up as Ron walked to the entrance of the tunnel and waved his hand, not to Tom, but to someone in the bright lights on the field. Another silhouette appeared in the glare of the lights next to Ron. Tom recognized Coach Brown. The man slapped Ron on the back, then jerked his head in the direction of the field. Coach waded into the dark tunnel and sat next to Tom, looking straight ahead at the opposite wall, saying nothing.

After an eternity of silence, Coach spoke in a low voice. "Good meet for some, rough for others, huh?"

"Yeah," Tom muttered.

"The kid from Casper High was pretty amazing."

Tom bit his tongue. He knew Coach well enough to know he wouldn't sit still for the kind of talk Tom had unleashed on Ron.

Coach paused for a long moment. "Do you know his name?"

"Nah, don't care."

"Andre Perez." Coach paused again as if he were weighing a decision before he continued. "Andre's autistic, which makes his win all the more amazing. Bet you didn't know that."

Tom thought about what Coach had just said. His cousin Justin had autism. “On the spectrum,” Aunt Wendy called it. Justin drove Tom nuts whenever they were together. All Justin talked about was Star Wars movies. He knew every character, recited dialog from memory, knew bizarre little facts, talked like the people in the movies were real people in real life. He had read every magazine and fan fiction book ever written about Star Wars. He worshipped George Lucas like God Almighty. Weird kid, for sure. He had a tough time in school and around people. Tom was one of the few relatives who would sit and listen to Justin for more than five minutes.

He thought about the weird stuff the Casper kid—Andre—had done. A light dawned. What if he wasn’t smug and arrogant? What if he was like Justin? What if he was hung up on shot putting like Justin was hung up on Star Wars?

Coach broke into Tom’s thoughts. “He lives with a foster family because his dad is gone and his mom’s in jail. Pretty hard life for a young man, don’t you think?”

Tom’s thoughts shifted to his family. He couldn’t begin to imagine life without Mom and Dad and his little brother and sister. They made him mad a lot, but at least they were there. This had been a rare event to not have one or the other of them at the meet. He was glad they hadn’t seen him choke, but he still missed them.

He didn’t know much about foster care, except for what he’d seen on TV. Still, living with strangers would have to be a lonely existence. And with autism?

Coach looked at Tom and put a hand on his shoulder. “I saw your marks in the prelims. You’ve done better.”

Leave it to Coach to make the understatement of the year! The image of the ugly shot popped into Tom’s mind. He could still feel the rough glob of welded metal pressing into his palm. “Yeah, that’s for sure.” His voice squeaked and cracked.

“Pretty bummed, I’d guess,” Coach said with a nod of his head. He withdrew his hand and resumed his gaze at the opposite wall.

Tom nodded silently. He thought about the day he wasted trying to make his shot perfect, only to ruin it and his chances of placing in the meet.

“What are you going to do tomorrow?” Coach’s tone brightened.

Tom hadn’t even thought about tomorrow. Saturday. He planned to go with his mom and siblings to the mall to get a new pair of Nikes, not that the old ones were worn out, but they were last year’s style. Catch a movie on the tube. His band was getting together in the evening for a rehearsal. He was going to show them his new Fender Strat for the first time. A pretty good day planned, all things considered. “Just stuff,” Tom replied.

“You know what Andre is going to do tomorrow?” Coach asked.

“Look at his gold medal?”

“Maybe, for a minute, and then he’ll spend the day wiping tables, sweeping floors, and emptying garbage cans at the McDonalds around the corner from his foster parents’ house.”

Tom didn’t need to worry about an after-school job. His dad said he didn’t want work to get in the way of studying and sports and whatever else Tom wanted to do. “You’re only in high school once,” Dad would say. He didn’t even like eating at McDonalds—except for the fries. He

had watched the kids—and the old people—cleaning and sweeping and hauling bags of garbage. He was glad he didn't have to do anything like that.

"So, how do you suppose Andre is feeling tonight?" Coach prompted.

With new eyes, Tom tried to see past his disappointment to consider what the kid was doing at that moment. Probably what Tom had hoped would happen to him if he had won—slaps on the back and high-fives under the lights. Were the guys chanting his name? Was he even smiling? "I don't know, Coach. He's probably pretty stoked."

Coach nodded. "In his way, I suppose he is. This is probably the biggest night of his life. It may be the biggest night he'll ever have. Hard to know where a young man like Andre will end up. Less than ideal home life, gangster neighborhood, hard time making friends, poor prospects. Hard to say what might be going on in his head."

A new feeling crept into Tom's chest. The weight of the day lifted just a little, and the knots in his stomach unwound two twists.

Out of the blue, Coach asked, "Who won gold in shot put in the last Olympics?"

Tom couldn't remember even *watching* the shot put in the Olympics, let alone who *won*, although he was sure he must have seen it. He watched every minute that was broadcast on TV. "I don't know," he finally admitted.

"Who won the Super Bowl last year?"

Oh, that's easy, Tom thought. *It was... um, huh.* "I don't remember," he said.

A smile formed on Coach's face. "I'm no prophet, but I'm going to predict that ten years from now, only two people will remember who won the shot put state championship tonight. One of them will be Andre. Who do you think the other person is?"

"Probably not his foster parents," Tom said. A thought popped into his head. "Me?"

Coach's smile broadened. "I'll bet that's right. And do you know why? Because you are a good young man, and you'll be a good man for the rest of your life—if you remember this night in the right way."

Tom dragged his ugly shot from under the bench. He looked at it like he was seeing it for the first time. The man in the hat had talked about learning a lesson. Tom recalled seeing Andre standing stoically, not meeting anyone's eyes. He was no longer the enemy. He was a lonely, troubled kid who couldn't do anything but throw a shot put and wipe tables in a hamburger joint.

"Let's get back on the field and join the team. The meet is almost over," Coach said. He stood. Tom pushed himself off the bench, his ugly shot nestled in the crook of his elbow. The two walked slowly from the tunnel into the lights. Tom could hear the noise now on the field and in the stands. Thousands of voices yelled and cheered. The sound was jubilant, almost magical.

Tom spotted the group of red uniforms near mid-field. But then, out of the corner of his eye, light blue uniforms caught his attention. Coach must have seen it too. "How 'bout if we go over and congratulate Andre on his win?" Coach suggested.

They turned and walked together towards the Casper team. The athletes milled around, talking to each other, shaking hands, showing off their medals. Tom spotted Andre apart from the

team, sitting on the grass, his head down. The dark-haired boy did not look up as the two approached.

Coach spoke first. "You're Andre Perez, right?"

The boy nodded, eyes still fixed on his knees while his outstretched feet bounced rhythmically together. "I'm Coach Brown, from Laketown High School. You scored an impressive win tonight, young man." Andre did not look up, just continued to knock his white sneakers together. "I want to introduce you to Tom Bradford. He's the shot putter on my team."

The soles of Andre's shoes never stopped thumping, his ankles rotating in and out, in and out. Then, in almost a whisper, he said, "I know who you are. Thomas Bradford. Fremont District JV champ. Fifty-three eleven. That's you."

The soft voice caught Tom completely off guard. And the fact that the kid knew his name, where he was from, even his score—he was flabbergasted. Still Andre did not move, except to wag his feet back and forth. Where was the bravado, the chest pounding, the haughty look, the swagger? Sitting on the grass in his blue warm-up suit, he looked even smaller to Tom than when he had seen him in line at the weigh-in station. He was just another high school sophomore like Tom. Only he was so quiet and shy.

"Congratulations." Tom managed to force the word from his mouth. "You had a good meet."

Feet wagging, Andre whispered, "Not my best. My best was last week in practice. But practice doesn't count. Not my best today."

Coach extended his hand toward Andre. "I'd like to shake the hand of the state champion, Andre." The boy didn't move, just tapped his shoes together. Coach smiled as he withdrew his hand. "Well, nice job anyway."

A feeling fluttered in Tom's gut, a flash of recognition from somewhere he couldn't describe. He sat down on the grass facing Andre and stuck out his hand. "Thomas Bradford would like to shake the hand of Andre Perez, state champion shot putter, fifty-four two."

Andre's head came up slowly, and for an instant his eyes met Tom's. "Fifty-four six," he whispered, looking off in the distance. "My last throw was fifty-four six. Not my best score. My best was last week in practice. But practice doesn't count." Without warning, Andre thrust his hand out toward Tom, eyes still fixed on an unseen horizon. Tom leaned forward and took Andre's hand, giving it a solid, manly shake. Andre pulled his hand back, and Tom stood up.

"See you next year, man," Tom said.

Watching his ever-moving toes again, Andre said, "See you next year, Thomas Bradford, fifty-three eleven."

As they walked away, Coach said, "You know, that ugly shot you're holding is school property. You have to replace it."

Tom's thoughts were a million miles away. He hardly noticed the shot tucked in his arm. "Yeah, I guess I hadn't thought about that. What does it cost for a new one?" Tom asked.

"About thirty bucks."

That got Tom's attention. "Ouch! I guess I'll talk to my mom."

“Good,” Coach said as he put an arm around Tom’s shoulder. “And I suggest you keep that one. You’ve paid for it in more ways than one. It ought to remind you of this night.”

The remark brought Tom up short. “I’ve heard that somewhere else,” he said.

Late that night, when he got home, Tom took a washcloth from the linen closet and spread it out on his dresser and set the shot on it. He knew Mom would scold him if he scratched the furniture. As he looked at it, he promised to do two things. Monday he would apologize to Ron. And tomorrow he would ask Mom to take him to Justin’s house. Watching Star Wars Episode IV one more time would not kill him.