



Reader's Digest

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ON A BRIGHT November morning in 1987, Cyril Charles, 24, was among the thousands of runners swarming on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge as the New York City Marathon began. He could not see their faces in the milky fog of his vision, but his heart thrilled to their cheering and to the thunderous drum of their stampeding feet. Over the bridge and into Brooklyn he ran, shoulder-to-shoulder with his sighted guide. "Good luck, blind runner," a voice shouted.

His sight failing since childhood, the young man had little hope for a full life

"Blind Runner Coming Through!"

BY PETER MICHELMORE

As Cyril ran on, mile after mile, memories of his past fell away.

Ox carts laden with sugar cane were scattered along the dusty roads of Trinidad's western hill country as Cyril Charles covered the eight miles from his house to school. Much of the way he would walk, but every so often he'd pick out a tree in the distance and



Runners Matt Densen and Cyril Charles, arms raised in triumph, cross the finish line in the November 1989 New York City Marathon

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sprint for it, his bare feet flying.

He was nine years old then, a dark-skinned boy with a nap of curly hair and a gift for running. "We'll play cricket at lunchtime," he called out to his friends as the school bell pealed.

Like most Trinidadian boys, he had a passion for the game. As in baseball, runs are scored by hitting a hard ball with a wooden bat.

At lunch, Cyril was in his usual position in the catcher's, or wicket-keeper's, spot. He watched the ball leave the bowler's hand and bounce once in front of the batsman. He saw the bat connect. For a moment the batsman, stepping forward, distracted him. A boy swooped on the ball and gripped it to throw. "Cyril!" he shouted. "Cyril!"

Cyril turned too late. The ball cracked into the bones of his right eye socket. He fell senseless to the ground, the boys crowding around. When the blackness lifted, his eye burned, but his head was clearing. "I'm all right," he said.

At home his mother bathed the eye and sent him off to do his chores. Their rented cottage had neither running water nor electricity. There were oil lamps to fill and water to cart from the village.

Failing Grades. A month later the letters and numbers on the school blackboard began to blur. The accident may have inflamed an existing infection. Cyril's corneas were scarring over. "Unless he goes to Barbados for transplants, he will eventually lose his sight," a doctor

told Agatha Charles. "We don't have the money," Cyril's mother replied, ending the discussion.

Sitting at the front of the class, Cyril could make out most of the blackboard for a time. When reading and writing, he squinted. Gradually, however, his vision became cloudier and his grades deteriorated. He handed in a paper one day, and the teacher slashed a big black X across it. "Move to the back of the class," he said curtly, probably under the impression that Cyril was neglecting his studies.

I'll never learn anything now, Cyril thought.

By the time Cyril was 12, his right eye could only discern between light and dark. His left eye had limited, foggy distant sight; to read with it he put his face an inch from the page. His grades plummeted.

Finally, Cyril was sent to a boarding school for blind children in Santa Cruz, eight miles to the northeast of Port of Spain, the national capital. In the five years he spent at the school, Cyril came to think of it as a prison where kids were kept in submission until they were ready to weave baskets and cane chairs in association workshops.

Cyril was discouraged. He and his friends cleaned and painted the school swimming pool and asked to use it. But they were unable to because they could not persuade the teachers to supervise them. He desperately wanted to attend a nearby secondary school, but his requests were ignored. The principal prom-