
Lance Mossett
Ana Lilia Landa
Jim Moore
MOORE

THE TEST OF THEIR LIVES

COACH MOORE, ACE BUNNY, AND THE NERDS OF WATTS TAKE ON L.A.'S TOUGHEST ACADEMIC CHALLENGE

BY JESSE KATZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREGG SEGAL

THE THING ABOUT TRYING to make a difference is that you just never know. You can give and care and hope—and in the end, that might be all you are left with, your good intentions, your doubts. On the August day two years ago when Jim Moore first set foot in Jordan High, he was not even sure he had any beliefs worth defending. He had come to L.A. from the Central Coast for one reason, to reunite with his girlfriend, and just like that he was an English teacher in Watts, making 41 grand to herd kids through one of the most broke-down schools in the city. The campus, built in 1925, was wedged between the Atlas Iron & Metal recycling center and the Jordan Downs housing project, a sandwich of junkyard and gangland. There were gates around every building, bars on every window, chains looped through every trash can, graffiti etched into every desk, chair, door, computer, and tree. The principal asked him what he thought. "I was like, 'Holy shit, guy,'" Moore says. "'This place looks like a fucking prison.'"

By almost every measure, Jordan was failing. A third of the faculty had just left. Another third had yet to be credentialed. The dropout rate was close to 50 percent. Only about 225 of the school's 2,250 students were considered proficient in language arts or math. Still, when the principal held a staff meeting before the start of classes and asked for a volunteer to coach Jordan's academic decathlon team, it was Moore's hand that shot up. He was 36, strong but spongy, with a dimpled chin and loud voice and bouncy ginger brown hair, features that call to mind Will Ferrell's overgrown frat boy in *Old School*. He had never heard of academic decathlon. He had no idea what coaching it entailed. "I was pretty much just trying to curry favor," Moore says. "I was the new guy. Sucking up." Being in Los Angeles for the first time, working in the ghetto, wondering how whipped he must be to have chased a girl across the state—these matters weighed heavily on Moore. He puked every morning. He showed up for class having already sweated through his shirt. His girlfriend would pack him lunches, always fresh and healthy, and every afternoon he would toss them, scarcely touched, into the backseat of his $1,200 VW Fox, the one with the shattered window he was too poor and lazy to fix. One day a security guard at Jordan, patrolling the faculty lot, noticed a swarm of flies around Moore's car. The smell was atrocious. Something in there was rotting. "They actually had to call me out of the classroom," Moore says. "They thought it was a dead body."

Academic decathlon is the Los Angeles Unified School District's good-news story, proof that a public school system in the most complex and challenging of cities can still claim excellence. Although the district is often vilified for the slow progress of its 700,000 students—and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has staked his political reputation on a takeover bid—the LAUSD is without equal in the ten-event intellectual Olympics known as aca-deca. In L.A. Unified's 26 years of competition, the city champion has gone on to win the California Academic Decathlon 15 times; nine of those teams have won the United States Academic Decathlon. No other school district in America can touch that record, much less a district saddled with the poverty and language barriers found here. L.A. Unified, of course, also contains pockets of relative wealth and sophistication: Just three high schools (Taft, El Camino Real, Marshall) representing two well-off communities (Woodland Hills, Los Feliz) are responsible for every state and national crown. All of the district's other high schools—roughly 60 of them—are nonetheless expected to participate, to field a nine-member team every fall and match wits in the citywide meet, held over two weekends in January and February. This is true even of schools without a prayer, schools from the highest-crime, lowest-income corners of L.A., schools on 103rd Street led by accidental coaches who have not yet figured out what they are in for.

BULLDOG PRIDE
Jordan is Lance Mossett's 13th school. Gabby Castrejon (opposite) leads her teammates into the Super Quiz at UCLA's Wooden Center

With expectations low—Jordan had most recently finished in 57th place—Moore stumbled through that first year, content to collect his $2,600 coach's stipend. "The impression I got from Jordan was that they just wanted warm bodies," he says. "We weren't going to win. We just needed to show up." Practices were a joke. The kids skimmed the ma-

terial. Moore watched the clock. They went through with it, though, donned their letterman jackets and sharpened their pencils, and when it was over, the team had made an impressive leap, out of the cellar and into 49th place. At the awards banquet, a white-tablecloth affair in the Los Angeles Convention Center, Moore was amused to learn they had even won a trophy: Most Improved. It was just enough to get him thinking, to imagine how good Jordan might be—if he ever got his act together, if he accepted the idea that he really was a teacher. He knew the award was an empty honor, owed largely, he says, to "the slackards who came before me." What if he could build on his own success, make another leap like this one, prove to the world that the best and brightest of Watts can hold their own in any arena? "I don't want to be the fumbling guy," Moore says. "I want to play out that Disney movie. I want that whole little rags-to-riches story."

So as the next school year got under way, as he went about assembling Jordan's 2006-7 academic decathlon team, Moore began to fixate on winning Most Improved for the second year in a row. Not a championship. He had not caught aca-deca fever so badly that he was now blind to the odds. But to hoist another trophy and know that his team actually earned it: "That," he says, "is my freakin' little obsession."

WHAT IF JIM MOORE COULD BUILD ON HIS OWN SUCCESS, PROVE THAT THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST OF WATTS CAN HOLD THEIR OWN IN ANY ARENA?

BEING A NERD anywhere comes with social risks. Being a nerd in the hood comes with even more. When the future is unimaginable, studiousness tends to be mocked, the willingness to delay gratification too often derided as a sucker's bet. At Jordan, status is found in gang allegiance, musical proclivity, sports affiliation, dance-floor finesse, and sexual maturity. Boys project hardness: shaved heads, thick chains, oversize clothes. Girls entice: dyed braids, pierced noses, curve-hugging clothes. Everyone is casting about for an antidote to despair, a look, a talk, a walk, some outward sign that Watts has not beaten them down.

Academic decathlon is a long, private, unglamorous sacrifice. It requires adolescents to digest a startling amount of knowledge, more intricate and esoteric than a well-rounded adult would ever possess, and do so in seclusion, week after week, month after month, without a chance to show off their investment—no audiences, no cheerleaders—only a closed-door tournament that will end the season for all but the strongest competitors. As much as Jordan's students are disinclined to make such a commitment, Moore is even warier about being the pitchman. "I'm

a shoestring kind of guy," says Moore, who manages without a cell phone or a watch or an ATM card. "I don't have natural skills at this." Every decathlon comprises the same ten events—math, economics, social science, literature, art, music, Super Quiz, essay, speech, and interview—but the theme changes from year to year: "China and Its Influence on the World" is this season's focus. That means wading through a couple millennia of history, from the Shang dynasty to the Cultural Revolution, picking apart Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, grappling with atonal scales and the *yüeh-fu* poetic tradition, not to mention delving into differential calculus and macroeconomic theory. "I need more bells and whistles," says Moore, who spends the first week of school trolling the halls, working the P.A., getting jeered at assemblies. "A propaganda film. We gotta make it seem like we're having a lot of fun doing this crap."

The school, as before, has pledged to outfit the team with jackets, and to Moore's surprise, administrators are dangling the prospect of a trip to China. He is not sure how he feels about that. "They're always promising things around here," Moore says, "and never delivering." He decides to keep it modest, advertising free pizza for anyone who comes to his orientation meeting.

He should have four seniors returning from last year's team, led by Angela Nzegwu, ranked number one at Jordan from the day she enrolled. The daughter of a Nigerian minister, she is president of both the debate team and the National Honor Society chapter. She will be Jordan's 2007 valedictorian. Every college in America, it seems, wants to fly her out for a visit. "We have a pretty good group coming in, actually," Moore says. "I'm a lot more relaxed right now."

FINAL ANSWER
Jim Moore and assistant coach Rebecca Hill await the Super Quiz results. Ana Lilia Landa (opposite) was the team's leading scorer

Moore's class is on the second floor of the Science Building, room 251. The door is locked, even when he is in there, a precaution almost every Jordan teacher takes. The ceiling is crumbling; tiles have fallen out, revealing wires and ducts. Water seeps from a third-floor chemistry lab, leaving a foul puddle on the floor. The lights come and go. Taggers and gangsters, representing every clique, crew, and posse in Watts, have carved up the furniture. When Moore discovers that someone has inscribed his door with "AWD," he takes his car keys and modifies the vandal's work. The *A* becomes an *M*, the *W* an *OO*. It is hard to imagine that his bosses would be delighted to see "MOORE" scratched into the paint, but his students are suitably impressed.

At lunch on September 13, the pizzas arrive. Moore's classroom fills up. Sixteen students print their names on the sign-in sheet. Nearly all belong to Jordan High's magnet program, a school within a school for the 200 or so most gifted students. On campus they are easy to spot, either straight arrows or odd ducks, more innocent or iconoclastic than Jordan's general population. They are the loners, the poets, the radicals, the bookworms, Moore's kind of child. As a teenager, he was an outsider himself, finding solace in Dungeons & Dragons, enlisting in Model U.N. "When you meet one of these kids, you sort of go, 'Wow, how did that happen?'" Moore says. "It's really interesting, in this inhospitable environment, to see what people can pull off."

First on the list is Ana Lilia Landa. She calls herself Weird-Ass Lily. She wears camouflage pants and paints her nails with a black Sharpie. A junior, she was the only girl on Jordan's J.V. football team the previous year, defying her parents by becoming a third-string fullback. "It's

like the survival of the fittest around here," says Ana Lilia, who carried the ball only once. On her 15th birthday, she defied her parents again, refusing to perform the rituals of a *quinceañera*. "Screw all that girlie crap," she says. "I'm more of an independent." Her notebook is decorated with the lyrics to a Lil' Kim–Christina Aguilera song: "Call me a bitch cuz I speak what's on my mind. / Guess it's easier for you to swallow if I sat and smiled." Sitting in the corner, off to himself, is Jose Merino. He lives in Jordan Downs, home turf of the Grape Street Crips, one of the few gangs on the LAPD's "worst 11" list whose inclusion nobody has disputed. Jose's strategy for sidestepping trouble: "Don't look at them wrong, don't say nothing bad, don't do nothing dumb." A sophomore, he has close-set eyes and a tiny hearing aid but refuses to be left out. "I'll probably get into politics, maybe business or medicine," says Jose, whose parents fled El Salvador's civil war. "Or if I don't make it, join the military and get in the Special Forces." Strolling in late, with her bleached hair and costume jewelry, Gabby Castrejon is a Gwen Stefani look-alike. Her nickname is Skittles, as in the rainbow-colored candy. She dyes her hair every six months: blue, green, pink, purple, orange. "Basically, I grew up having to take care of myself," says Gabby, who is a senior, the daughter of a nanny and a long-haul trucker. "In elementary school, I used to pretend I had a tummy ache or go run and try to scrape my knee—anything so that I could end up in the nurse's office."

With the exception of Angela and one or two others, every student in Moore's room is Latino, a reminder of how swiftly immigration has reshaped a community synonymous with black America. Between 1990 and 2000, Watts lost its African American majority; of its 35,000 residents, 21,000 are now Latino. The two-and-a-quarter-square-mile patch of southeast Los Angeles is still derelict. Stray dogs, weed-choked lots, shuttered factories, dice games, wheelchairs, a discarded box spring converted into a trampoline—the images of Watts continue to bespeak neglect and isolation. But Watts is a more complicated ghetto than it ever was, the divide between black and brown artificially maintained by the community's three large public housing projects. The oldest of them, Jordan Downs, built as temporary quarters for World War II–era laborers, is a 700-unit encampment, block after block of two-story concrete barracks surrounded by heavy iron bars. Inside the project, blacks remain a majority—about 60 percent of the 2,600 residents—a subsidized underclass that has watched a barrio sprout just beyond the fence. Jordan High, which abuts Jordan Downs, is a truer reflection of the neighborhood: The student body is nearly 80 percent Latino. "Did you know that David Starr Jordan was a eugenist?" Moore asks one day. The namesake of these two troubled institutions was a prominent turn-of-the-century scholar and pacifist. Jordan was also chairman of the American Breeders Association's Committee on Eugenics, which held that great societies depend on the propagation of "desirable" races—a view that would have appealed to the white forefathers of Watts. "Ah, the irony," says Moore.

While the students eat, he makes his pitch, thumbs hooked in the corners of his pockets, voice rising almost to a shout. A former petty officer in the navy, Moore speaks with an air of authority, even if what he says borders on the subversive. At six feet and 220-plus, he can be at once imposing and self-deprecating, blunt and goofy—mixed signals that tend to give his homilies, no matter how earnest, the whiff of a put-on. He is not a miracle worker, the white savior from an after-school special. He is not one of the cool young teachers, the kind eager to show off their rapport with inner-city kids. Moore is a Gen Xer lurching toward middle age, trying to pay the rent, hoping to win the girl, struggling to live his life without being a fake. "Up to now, I haven't exactly been a do-gooder," he says. "Some teachers, they're like, 'Oh, the children...' I'm not sure if I have that driving, crazy love. I'm kind of a half-assed crusader."

He has coined his own slogan, a hokey thing to do. But when Moore delivers it, as he does now and at the end of every class, he reveals no trace of a smirk. "Be good humans," he tells his future team.

MOORE IS NOT A MIRACLE WORKER, THE WHITE SAVIOR FROM AN AFTER-SCHOOL SPECIAL. HE IS NOT A COOL YOUNG TEACHER.

THERE ARE SIGNS, even before the first day of school, that the deck is stacked against him. Over the summer Jordan relocated his classroom and, in the transition, threw everything out. Moore had made copies of all the study materials—the official resource guides published by the U.S. Academic Decathlon people in Iowa—and assembled them in thick binders, one for each student. Now they are gone. So are Moore's books, an entire library's worth, hundreds of them, maybe even a thousand, all tossed like ballast from a sinking ship. "I mean, who throws away a thousand books? That must have taken hours," Moore says. "I can almost imagine the bonfire out on the quad, like some scene in *Fahrenheit 451*."

The daily schedule at Jordan has also been changed, a small revision with unintended consequences. The previous year, the school had operated under a traditional six-period format, with decathlon offered as an elective. It ensured Moore at least 45 minutes every day with a captive group. This year Jordan has moved to a block schedule—also known as a four-by-four—the same four classes every day, each an hour and a half, for an entire semester. Block scheduling is a favored tactic of educational reformers, including the Bill & Melinda [CONTINUED ON PAGE 247]

Academic Decathlon

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 151] Gates Foundation, which awarded L.A. Unified a $3 million grant to help implement the program. The thinking is that sustained instruction, without a change of teachers or a looming bell, will help remedial students stay focused. For Jordan's decathletes, though, the blocks have left no time to meet. The administration did schedule a decathlon class, for third period, but it conflicted with Advanced Placement English and Advanced Placement Government. Nobody came. "Ready for another fine sailing of the *Titanic*?" grumbles Moore, his room empty from 11:19 to 12:49. Because each class is essentially a double period, every lost day counts as two. Moore sits around for nine days like this—which is to say, 18 days of squandered instruction—before the decathlon class is finally dissolved.

Jordan's team, if there is going to be one, will have to practice after school. Moore summons his prospective decathletes to the library on September 18, the start of the third week. Only half of the 16 students who ate his pizza bother to show up. They seem interested mainly in the China trip, which is being promoted by a Teach for America instructor named Rebecca Hill, who has also volunteered as Moore's assistant coach. "I don't know about Ms. Hill," says Moore, still worried about how the trip will be funded. "It seems like everyone wants a piece of the pie. Whatever. No, that's stupid. I should grow the fuck up." The recruits include Manuel Marroquin, who has to care for three younger brothers so that his mom can tend to their dad, disabled in a forklift accident. Next to him is Kevin Rocha, a 16-year-old with a mustache and a Shakira fixation. They are joined by Sara Rodriguez, who writes for Jordan's newspaper, the *Bulldog Times*. "Colleges are looking for people that are hardworking and dedicated," says Sara, 1 of 11 children born on both sides of the border. "My mom only got a second-grade education. She didn't achieve much. She doesn't want that to happen to us."

Missing from this inaugural practice is Angela. So is every other senior from last year's squad. With so few ambitious students at Jordan, the same cluster of overachievers is committed to just about every after-school activity. There is not a single day of the week, Moore is learning, when he can get them all together. "I'm getting pretty friggin' pissed," he says. "This is becoming a suicide mission." Angela drops by a few days later and tries to reassure him, promising to study the material independently—in between trips to Amherst and Swarthmore and Yale. She would be like a hired gun, swooping in to bolster their score on tournament day. "We'll work something out," she predicts. "I have weapons of mass persuasion." The director of Jordan's magnet program, Anne Lamont, urges Moore to accommodate Angela, to run the team as a meritocracy. Without her, what progress can Jordan hope to make? "I would just devise a test," Lamont says, "and see who can actually answer the questions." But Moore wants a real team, "a fanatic little core," and it rankles him that his star is already lobbying for special treatment. Jordan has enough status issues without partitioning its decathletes into two unequal camps. "You have to ask yourself, who are we doing this for, anyway?" Moore says. "Who needs it the most? I have no fear for Angela—she's already on her way. I think I'd rather go down with a bunch of Bad News Bears who are committed than with a group of A students who aren't."

If Jordan were a different kind of school, if academic decathlon enjoyed the same prestige in Watts that it does in Woodland Hills, it is doubtful that Moore would have been forced to choose—or that Angela would have risked being left out. Aca-deca is such an institution at El Camino (eight state championships, four national championships) that every year families move into the neighborhood just to get their kids on the team. The recruiting begins not in the fall but the previous spring, with a pool of at least 60 or 70 students, some of them the younger siblings of past decathletes. They are put through a battery of tests and interviews and essays, then winnowed like *American Idol* contestants, until only the top nine are left standing. They practice over the summer, on weekends, through holidays, extending their hours every month. Local businesses and service groups donate thousands. By the end, the kids are drilling at school until ten every night, pausing only to break for dinner, delivered on a rotating schedule by their parents. "It's almost like win or don't bother—at least that's the feeling," says El Camino's coach, Lissa Gregorio.

Nothing about that makes sense to the Jordan students, whose neighborhood has a median family income of $20,158, less than a fourth of the $91,523 around El Camino. Their parents are largely from rural Mexico, farmers and ranchers who are now janitors and babysitters and sweatshop hands, who do not speak English, who do not own computers, who did not attend high school themselves. Just 3 percent of adults in Watts have a college degree. In Woodland Hills, 45 percent do. Some of the Jordan kids have not even told their parents that such a thing as the decathlon exists. That goes for Jose Mendoza, whose mom is a hospital maid, and Zindy Valdovinos, whose mom cooks at Burger King, and Valéria Mendoza, who is only 15 but engaged to be married this summer to a 21-year-old car detailer. This her mother does know. Valéria has no papers; her fiancé will make her legal. They attend a school that shares a common fence with the headquarters of a criminal enterprise, one that wars with its counterparts, a dozen or so blocks away, in Imperial Courts and Nickerson Gardens. In their neighborhood, a kid can get killed for wearing a white T-shirt, or a red or a blue or a purple one, for saying the wrong thing when asked, as everyone inevitably will be, where they are from. Between the first day of school in September 2006 and the awards banquet in February 2007, there will be 130 violent crimes reported within a one-mile radius of the Jordan campus: four murders, one rape, 70 assaults, and 55 robberies. Within a one-mile radius of El Camino, there will be three. "If you think about it, you never really get any rest living here," says Gabby. "You have to keep your eyes open all the time."

At Jordan, most of the kids depend on public transportation. At El Camino, they have their own cars. At Jordan, everyone gets a government lunch. At El Camino, the decathletes snack in an upstairs faculty lounge dubbed "the penthouse," where they have access to a fridge, a microwave, a coffeemaker, and their own cabinets and drawers. In one corner, on a table with hand sanitizer and moisturizing cream, there is a jiggly little hula doll—a reminder that the national competition, held in Honolulu this year, is El Camino's ultimate goal. "Damn," Moore says, "that's like two steps away from a cult. Throw in a few candles and you're there."

* * * * *

Advertised as a "competition of intellectual strength," academic decathlon follows an egalitarian rule. On the premise that intelligence comes in many forms, every team is required to have an equal number of A, B, and C students, categories known by the euphemisms Honor, Scholastic, and Varsity. At elite schools, the three Varsity students are not hard to recruit; a 2.0 GPA can mean brilliant yet bored. At schools like Jordan, where teachers tend to be generous to any student who avoids trouble, a 2.0 represents the fringe; filling the third and

final spot in that category—the C3s, as they are known—can sometimes require a coach to do the work of a probation officer.

The last student to make his way onto the team, sporting a GPA of 1.8, is Lance Mossett. He once ran with a crew called Pimpin' Ho's Daily. He calls himself Ace. The girls call him Ace Bunny. He shows up in the library one November afternoon in cornrows and earrings, a rhinestone dollar sign for a belt buckle, and a fur-lined parka embroidered with Nas lyrics: "I never sleep, 'cause sleep is the cousin of death." He is 15 and a sophomore. He wants to know if academic decathlon counts as community service. Moore is slow to catch on. "You mean for graduation?" he asks. Lance shakes his head. "No," he says, "for court. The judge says I gotta do 32 hours." Lance, it turns out, has stolen a doughnut—"impulse," he explains—a 50-cent pastry from a shop near the Lakewood Center mall. The owner flagged down a cop, who caught up with Lance and, at gunpoint, ordered him to surrender. "I gave it right back," says Lance, who also got slapped with a $375 fine. "They didn't have to tell me but one time."

Jordan is Lance's 13th school. His dad is absent. "He poofed," Lance says. His mom is an addict. "She poofed," Lance says. Since he was in kindergarten, Lance has bounced from South-Central to Palmdale to Gardena to Moreno Valley to Compton to Van Nuys. He has been homeless. He has lived in a battered women's shelter. He has been in and out of foster care. He is in the custody now of a woman he calls Granny, staying with his two youngest half-brothers in an upstairs apartment at the end of an alley. A painting of a Godzilla-size Jesus, gently tapping the side of the United Nations building, hangs on the living room wall. "I've been left for a week—for *weeks*—at a time," says Lance, who entered Jordan at the end of his freshman year, just as his mother entered a rehab program. "I've had to go out and try to find my mom, try to find something for me and my brothers to eat, missions like that. Crazy. And through all that, I'm still the same cheerful Lance." He smiles a droopy-lidded smile, generous and serene. Despite all the turmoil he has endured, or maybe because of it, Lance does project an innate sort of grace, an ingenuousness that wins over just about everyone who meets him. He knows it—recognizes that being a wordsmith and a hustler and a shaman and a flirt has been his key to survival—and so the lone black kid on a squad of Latino decathletes, the C3, wastes no time making the team his own. "I keep a real nice spirit," he says. "But I'm not a punk. I'm just real cool. Just Lance. Simply Lance."

One night several of the kids head to a Magic Johnson's Starbucks in Ladera Heights for a poetry slam. They are chaperoned by Hill, a recent New York University graduate who completes her two-year Teach for America commitment this summer. They take seats on the patio, amid clouds of cigar smoke, sipping caramel Frappuccinos. The scene is jazzy, urbane, political, a world away from Jordan. Lance is swept up. On a scrap of paper he begins composing an ode to Granny, one of the few adults in his life who has not let him down. Then he steps to the mic. None of the other kids, not Hill, can believe what is happening. Lance has said nothing, sought no reassurance. Now he has the entire coffeehouse under his spell, everyone nodding, flowing, communing. By the time he is done, grown-ups are wiping their eyes. "So emotional," says Sara. The next day at lunchtime, after learning what he had missed, Moore looks for Lance. He wants to give him props, to salute his honesty and courage. This is exactly what the decathlon should be about. But on the Jordan quad, teeming with thugs and jocks and party girls, he succeeds only in making Lance shrink.

"I hear you had people crying," Moore says.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Lance replies.

Moore asks to see what he wrote. Lance has already thrown it away.

* * * * *

After weeks of starts and stops, the team at last settles into a routine. They have decided to practice in the library on Mondays and Thursdays, from 3:15 to 5:15, which everyone agrees is not enough but which has proved to be the only commitment Moore can secure. He has a consistent group of kids—Ana Lilia, Jose Merino, Gabby, Manuel, Kevin, Sara, Jose Mendoza, Zindy, Valéria, and Lance—yet rarely do more than five or six show up on any given day. "If we're really going to do this," Moore tells them, "we've got to get serious. If we go half-speed and we don't put enough dedication into it, we're going to look like fools when we get up there. I, for one, don't want to be embarrassed."

The shrieks of cheerleaders echo through the halls. Outside, on 103rd, tires squeal. "Drive-by," Manuel deadpans.

The Jordan kids are curious, eager to transcend their surroundings. But their intelligence tends to be extemporaneous and intuitive, assets not tailored for the decathlon's rote memorization. Without parents who read or write much, in any language, they lack frames of reference, proficiency in grammar and syntax, an awareness of cultures outside their own. They are young, too—only Gabby is a senior—and have yet to encounter much of the material in their regular curriculum. "Our kids don't have a shot," Moore says. "But then, our kids don't have a shot at a lot of things." Some days he prepares five pages of handwritten notes and gets through only one or two. He has to spoon-feed information, pausing, waiting, spelling out unfamiliar words two and three times.

"How do you spell *dilemma*?" asks Ana Lilia.

"D-i...," Moore begins. "Are you serious, or just trying to embarrass me?"

"I just like saying that word," says Ana Lilia. "*Dilemma*."

Many of these concepts are a stretch even for Moore, especially the theme of this year's Super Quiz. Suddenly he has had to become an expert in climatology, to explain the minutiae of orbits and seasons and greenhouse gases. "I'm not a science teacher," he says one afternoon, aiming a flashlight at a globe, "but light is kind of energy and matter at the same time."

"Isn't there a thing called antimatter?" Lance asks.

Moore is stymied. "I dunno," he says. "That sounds like *Star Trek*."

As much as he talks about beating last year's score, about building a team and forging camaraderie, Moore often doubts his own commitment. He wants decathlon to be unforgettable, the experience that alters a teenager's future, but he also disparages true believers, teachers with nothing but "sad little teacher lives." Like the kids, he pulls in late, cuts out early, forgets his stuff. Even if he invested everything, allowed decathlon to consume his identity, what would he have to show for it in the end? The obstacles are so daunting, the frustrations so exhausting. There is so much beyond his control. "I hate feeling ineffective," Moore says. "You always feel ineffective around here."

One afternoon Ana Lilia arrives a few minutes late. Moore is sitting in the library alone.

"Everyone took off on me," he sighs.

"Imagine that," says Ana Lilia, who keeps her long, kinky hair pinned up with a pencil. Her father, a ranchero from Jalisco, sneaked across the border in the '80s, a teenager like her. He found work making picture frames but twice returned to Mexico, figuring it was better to leave on his own than risk being deported. On his third trip north, he qualified for amnesty, sent for his wife, and started his own framing company. He was living a dream. In 2003, fire swept through the factory, destroying everything he had built. It took a while—insurance covered only a fraction of his loss—but Ana Lilia's dad is back framing pictures again.

"I don't approve of dictatorship," she continues, "but I'd be okay with it."

"Start yelling at people?" Moore asks.

"Lord knows, you're a pushover."

"You think so?"

"Wait. Is this counting against me?"

Most days the clock cuts everything short. By five, the kids are already itchy. Nobody wants to get caught out late on the streets. "It's getting dark," Manuel says. "We're gonna get jumped." Moore is unsure what to make of these worries, how much is bluster, how much is wisdom. Even on the diciest corners, the odds favor survival. Most people, on most days, do not become victims. After wrecking his car in November—a scare but, given its condition, also a blessing—Moore briefly considers taking the Blue Line from his Westlake home. That would entail an eight-block hike along 103rd, a stretch known as Charcoal Alley during the Watts riots, past Jordan Downs. The team howls with laughter. "Moore!" Ana Lilia scolds him. "You're a white man in Watts!"

To help schools like Jordan compete, L.A. Unified hires a decathlon consultant. His name is Mr. Cathers, William Cathers, and he is so intense—lean, pale, bald, polished—that coaches like Moore instantly feel inadequate. "I don't do that touchy-feely, self-esteem stuff," says Cathers, who also designs leadership seminars for the Aspen Institute, the international think tank. "We're in a vicious competition. This is academic decathlon." Every other Saturday, at Bravo Medical Magnet in Boyle Heights, Cathers runs a workshop for at-risk schools. He speaks without a microphone, pacing the auditorium, part preacher, part drill sergeant. The Jordan kids often stumble in after he has already begun, still eating McDonald's breakfasts. One morning they find him in a black shirt with a mandarin collar. He is quoting a century-old president from memory:

> It is not the critic who counts,
> Nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbled,
> Or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
> The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
> Whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood.

He thrusts a finger at the students, letting Theodore Roosevelt's words sink in. Cathers calls failure the 11th event of the decathlon. He insists that more lives are ruined by the desire to avoid embarrassment—by self-imposed limits—than by all the hazards these children must navigate. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouts. "You listen to me!" He is laying it on now. "Don't forget this!" The Jordan kids are squirming, unaccustomed to being the object of such extravagance. "If you fail," Cathers demands of them, "at least fail while daring greatly!"

A week before Christmas, after one of those Saturday workshops, the Jordan team is rewarded with dinner at the Cheesecake Factory. It is Hill who has thought to load up the kids and take them to the Grove. She tells them that she and Moore are treating, a fact that comes as news to Moore. "That Ms. Hill," he growls. "I guess I should be nice." The Cheesecake Factory may represent middle-class comfort food, but for the Jordan kids it is the most exorbitant and adventurous dining experience of their lives. Eating at high-class places—"like with menus," Zindy says—is not just a question of economics. It is about cultural values, too, about paying others to cater to you, to make you feel grander than you are. "My parents, you know, they're like Mexico," says Zindy, who is 15 and a fan of Tinkerbell. "They don't think none of that kind of stuff is for us."

The restaurant is packed, the Grove swarming with holiday shoppers, and a 45-minute wait soon doubles. The kids slump on the floor of the marble lobby, anxious and bored. Moore paces, then leaves, then paces some more. Finally he decides to join them, lowering himself to a crouch and leaning against a copper wall. The second he commits his weight, the copper wall opens; it is an elevator door. There is nothing Moore can do to stop himself. He flops on his back, rolling into the cab, feet splayed in the air. As he lies there, stunned, in a position vaguely reminiscent of a dying cockroach, a gray-haired lady pushing a walker shuffles around him to exit. "Sorry about that," Ana Lilia says on Moore's behalf. The other kids are laughing so hard they can barely talk—"a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Jose Merino calls it. After gaining his composure, Moore sighs. "My life," he says, "has been one series of events like that."

To the Jordan students, Moore is a square, hardly equipped for the demands of teaching in Watts. His upbringing, though, was not so different from theirs, marked by the same chaos and poverty, the same inchoate sense that life beyond home must hold something better. His mother had already been through a marriage and had four kids by the time she met Jim's father, a merchant marine named Rice, in Chicago. Their affair was over as soon as Jim was born, and in the early '70s, she loaded her children into a station wagon and took off for California, to the Bay Area—"hippie times," Moore says. A succession of boyfriends tried to make nice: He was Jim Rice, then Jim Brown, then Jim Emerson, until a barber and drunk named Moore finally stuck around for a while. "I never called any of them Dad," he says. "It was almost a source of pride. Like, 'Screw you guys, I've made it this far.'" Moore attended school in San Bruno, near the San Francisco airport, but moved constantly, bouncing from apartments to motels. In eighth grade, he and his mom lived in a tent, at the Pinto Lake campground in Watsonville, strawberry capital of the world. "It was like something out of a John Steinbeck novel," Moore says. After coasting through Watsonville High, he decided his ticket out was the navy. It was the era of the cold war, and "shooting commies for Reagan," as Moore recalls, sounded like a noble cause. "I was kind of looking for my male identity," he says. "I wanted to be the perfect little soldier." He ended up on the USS *Iowa*, patrolling the Atlantic. On April 19, 1989, while Moore was sleeping, an explosion ripped through one of the *Iowa*'s gun turrets, killing 47 crewmen. In its haste to lay blame, the navy impugned one of the dead sailors, speculating that the blast was a murder-suicide, triggered by a homosexual breakup with a fellow shipmate. Further investigation pointed to the navy's careless handling of powder but not before the reputations of two servicemen had been trashed. Moore lost friends in the fire. He also lost his sense of duty, his faith in much of anything. "It jaded the hell out of me," says Moore, who left the military in 1991. "Before, I was all gung ho. Then I turned into somebody who was just getting over. It was a bitch."

He wandered for the next dozen years, doing construction, joining a forestry crew, working in a group home for the mentally disabled, all the while piecing together an education at Appalachian State, a teacher's college in North Carolina. By the time he graduated he was in his thirties, blitzed most of the time, and broke. "And I was not getting laid," Moore says. "I was kind of in Loserville." On a lark he applied for a job at his old high school in Watsonville. He was hired to teach English. Although he had a command of literature, he was overwhelmed by the adolescent meltdowns—the pranks, the hormones, the name-calling, the excuses—he was expected to mollify. School, it turns out, was not much different from the military, a government bureaucracy with the same politics, the same hypocrisies. After a month Moore quit, just stood up in the middle of class and said, "Fuck it, I'm outta here!" It is hard to say which is more remarkable, that the school asked him back or that Moore agreed, but his heart was never in it. He called the VCR his "teaching machine." His colleagues called him Movie Moore. Something about his rakishness, his terminal honesty, captured the interest of Michelle Espino, who was earning her master's there as a student teacher. "Jim's the only person I know," she says, "who can be drunk and broken down at the side of the road and get the county sheriff to help push him out of the ditch." Nearly 11 years younger, with a degree in women's studies from

UC Santa Cruz, Espino embarked on a moderately scandalous romance with him, one that looked doomed as soon as it began. Her best friend and roommate had just been accepted to a veterinary college in Pomona, and Espino had made a sisterly pledge to spend the next four years at her side. That should have been the end, but Moore found himself missing Espino more than he understood. She was nurturing and idealistic, dedicated in all the ways he was not. "She's made me a better person," he says. "She truly is coming from the right place all the time." In 2005, after a year apart, he told Espino he wanted to join her in L.A.; she had found a job at Jefferson High, and he figured he could get on at another inner-city school. She wanted him, too, but with one caveat: He could no longer be Movie Moore. "It was an ultimatum, actually," Espino says. "It was like, 'This has to stop or we can't be together.' It's immoral."

Finally, at the Cheesecake Factory, the long wait is over. The team charges up the stairs to the dining room. A couple of Abercrombie & Fitch types, making their way down at just the same moment, get brushed by the pack. "Loser candidates," one of them hisses. But the kids are too frantic to hear. At the table, they giggle and preen, concerned about etiquette, mystified by the menu. "I don't read 'fancy,'" says Jose Mendoza, never without his gray hoodie. Hill tells them to get whatever they want. "The more expensive it is," Kevin asks, "the better it tastes, right?" Between their nerves and the rich food, most of them have leftovers to pack. The check is $288. Moore has to borrow 20 bucks to get out of the parking lot.

* * * * *

Only nine students can compete in the decathlon, but as the weeks slip by, it is clear that the team, even in its shaky condition, has a membership of ten. Someone will have to go. This is not a subject that Moore has ever raised, for fear of scaring off his entire squad. Getting any commitment has been hard enough. How many kids would have found an excuse to quit, knowing that one of them, no matter what, was going to be cut? "You never want to spill that too soon," Moore says. "It's better to keep things fluffy and nice."

All indications are pointing to Jose Merino, the boy from the projects. He is a Fox News junkie, up to date on Iraq, skeptical of President Bush, attuned to 9/11 conspiracy theories. But Jose's impairments tend to interfere with his speech, a hash of sputters and mumbles. Even on this team of outcasts, he is isolated, unable to articulate all that he knows. "People have said that I'm a serial killer," says Jose, "because I'm so quiet. That's cold." If the team had started with a larger pool of recruits, Moore might not have felt so uncomfortable. At least Jose would have someone to commiserate with. But trimming just one student, and this late in the game, is oddly specific and personal. Moore, after all, had made a point of praising effort over intellect; if he were merely playing to win, he might as well have stuck with Angela. Jose is among the most reliable members of the group, just the sort of kid who needs the validation of a team, but he had posted the lowest score at a scrimmage in November. He is the weak link. "Welcome to the cruel, coldhearted world of Mr. Moore," Moore says. In early December he submits his roster to L.A. Unified. Jose is scratched. Moore cannot bring himself to break the news.

In the middle of January, two weeks before the first day of competition, a different crisis erupts. Manuel, the team's top scorer at the scrimmage, announces that he is going to quit. Winter finals are coming up, and he has decided, not unreasonably, that his grades are more important. Moore corners him in the hallway. "You can't do this to us," he insists. "We've come this far." Manuel, who is 17 and chubby, with spiky hair and a sarcastic flair, digs in. Moore is seething. The last thing he needs is a mutiny: If Manuel can get away with it, who else might try to bail? Then he has an idea. His problem with Manuel, just maybe, could be his solution with Jose. Moore calls the district and asks to make a substitution. "It's not like the rules apply to us that much anyway," he says. But there is no wiggle room. The rosters are frozen. "That fucking sucks, man," says Moore, who now has to lure back Manuel *and* let down Jose. "I so wish I could have put Jose in Manuel's place. That's who it's for, right? I mean, we're not winning anything, so why not reward the kids who are going to get something out of it? This is like the only place Jose really belongs."

A week before the competition, Moore pulls Jose out of practice and walks him down the hall, through a door, outside, to a second-floor landing. "I probably should have told you this earlier," begins Moore. He assures Jose that it is nothing punitive, just a question of numbers. Jose should still consider himself a member of the team. He will still get a jacket. He can still go to China. The only difference, really, is that he has been freed from taking more tests. Jose puts both hands on the ledge and bows his head. A mouthful of spit hangs from his lips. He is silent. It drops to the ground. Moore has run out of niceties.

"Can I go now?" Jose asks.

Two days later, the team takes a field trip to Hsi Lai Temple, the Buddhist compound in Hacienda Heights. A guide will talk to them about the nature of suffering, about embracing patience and letting go of desire. Suspecting that Jose might attend, Moore stays home. The whole thing has made him sick. He is supposed to be a source of inspiration, something decent in the lives of these children, and here he is breaking a kid's heart. Only one person can fix this, the boy as smooth as Moore is awkward. He calls Lance. "What's the favor, Mr. Moore?" Lance asks. "Uh-huh. Okay. Uh-huh. I'll do that for you. I'll talk to him. Yeah. Okay. Don't worry." Lance hangs up the phone. "Damn," he says, "the pressure I get for being social."

* * * * *

The worst day in the history of Jordan's academic decathlon program, one of the worst days an L.A. high school team of any sort has suffered, was March 16, 1996. It was a sparkling Saturday, a break from weeks of rain, and yet the Jordan kids hunkered down for hours on the second floor of the Science Building, writing essays. Although the season was over, the students had made such progress—leaping 11 places and cracking the top 40—that they decided to stick together and prepare for their Advanced Placement tests. By afternoon they were spent and, accompanied by their coaches, headed outside.

How the Grape Street Crips would have known that the decathletes were practicing on a weekend, why a nearly empty campus would have even caught their attention, nobody can say. Hopping the fence that separates Jordan Downs from Jordan High, two members of the gang rushed the team and took them all hostage. They ordered everyone—nine or ten kids, two adults—facedown on the asphalt. They prodded them with guns, threatening to kill anyone who looked up. Fearing something worse than a robbery, one of the coaches, a tall, skinny white guy, took off running, zigzagging across the faculty lot, bullets whizzing by his head. His name was Mr. Cathers, L.A. Unified's seller of optimism. "Show me a man that's not afraid, and I'll show you a fool," says Cathers, who charged into Alameda Street, pleading for help. One of the Crips settled on a 16-year-old girl, a Latina. He dragged her around the corner of the building, held her down, ripped her clothes, tried to penetrate her, rolled her over, tried again. It was not until the other assailant fled in Cathers's car that the rest of the team, realizing they were unguarded, rushed to the girl's defense and scared the rapist off. By the time Cathers returned with police, everyone was gone.

If the attack had taken place at another

school, against a different team, the outrage surely would have demanded a response from the highest levels of the city. But Jordan kept it hushed. The crime underscored too many of the school's predicaments—the racial politics, the fear of retaliation, all the stereotypes that would be confirmed if word were to leak out. There had been other rapes on campus that year, other assaults involving black boys and brown girls that administrators had covered up. The sense of powerlessness was so great, the menace from next door so direct, that silence and self-preservation had become one and the same. As shaken as he was by the attack, Cathers was more appalled by Jordan's impulse to minimize it. He considered speaking out, but then the 16-year-old victim filed a lawsuit, naming everyone from the superintendent to the principal to Cathers himself, and all of a sudden he, too, thought it prudent to be quiet. The decathletes, terrified and distraught, refused to continue at Jordan. Cathers never returned, either, nor did the teacher he had been assisting. New coaches came and went. Principals changed. The police failed to make an arrest. Over time, the whole matter was forgotten, expunged from Jordan's institutional memory—nothing the school would ever tell Moore.

* * * * *

The district meet is spread across two Saturdays, the subjective events—speech, interview, essay—coming first. Students are encouraged to dress up for their presentations, in business attire, not a feature of most Jordan wardrobes. Hill treats the girls to a spree at Target and Payless. The boys are on their own. Kevin shows up in a smart wasabi-colored suit. "Kiss ass," says Manuel. "Conformist." Lance reminds Manuel, still in his everyday school clothes, that he was about to quit on them a couple weeks back. "We're *decathletes*," says Lance, who is wearing pressed carpenter jeans and a purple-check dress shirt. He has cropped his hair and removed his earrings. He is also sporting a swollen right hand that throbs every time his fingers move. A few days earlier, Lance got into it with a friend from the projects, a boy named Metal Head. "Macho stuff," Lance explains. Considering that today's agenda includes 50 minutes of writing, being able to hold a pencil would have been a plus. Moore shakes his head. "That's exactly the kind of world we need to leave behind, Lance," he tells him.

Bravo High is hosting this opening round and as a welcome, has written the names of all 62 teams in chalk on the sidewalk. The Jordan kids are eager to find their school in the swirl of colors and fonts. "Ours is actually going to be spray painted," Manuel predicts. "In Old English letters." Other teams are also arriving, scanning the same stretch of concrete, except they are lugging giant legal boxes full of study materials and dressed as if headed to a winter formal. It is the first time that the Jordan students have rubbed shoulders with the competition, noted their stopwatches and laptops, glimpsed what middle-class America expects of its most industrious kids. In all of Jordan High, there are only two white students and three Asians; here there are hundreds—a large percentage of them Chinese American—all ready to square off on the intricacies of Chinese culture, no less. "I'm not intimidated by none of these suckers," says Lance, who then proceeds to bury his face in his hands. "Oh Jesus," he moans. "Bless me." Before they walk inside, Moore gathers them for a pep talk. He knows that little has gone according to plan, and he is anxious to prove, if only to himself, that these many months have not been a loss. "Hey, while we're still together—c'mere, c'mere—we should think of a little ritual," he says. Nobody responds. "If nothing else—keep quiet!—I want to tell you guys about how proud I am," he adds, groping for just the right sentiment. "You guys have been my best experience yet in teaching."

"Awwww," the kids say in unison.

At the check-in table, every competitor is supplied with a lanyard and a plastic badge holder. A red ribbon, with DECATHLETE stamped in gold letters, has been glued to the bottom. Moore hands out name cards, to be slipped into the sleeves. The regimentation is making the kids fussy. Some of their names are misspelled. The color of the ribbon, anathema on Crip turf, is arousing their instincts. "Man, this is not cool," says Jose Mendoza, who refuses to wear the lanyard around his neck and instead threads it through his belt loops. "I don't want to hear this talk," Moore says. "You're bringing us down." The only one who seems pleased with the accoutrements is Jose Merino, who has decided, in a show of loyalty or loneliness, or both, to attend as a spectator. Somehow, in the commotion, he gets his hands on an extra badge holder and, for the rest of the day, walks around with an empty rectangle on his chest.

The event that has everyone on edge is speech, which requires each decathlete to stand before a panel of judges and give, from memory, an original talk of at least three and a half minutes but no longer than four. This could have been Jordan's chance to shine: no abstract concepts or esoteric formulas to master, just a showcase for charisma and eloquence. But the kids have all procrastinated, dreading the prospect of being so exposed. They sketch out ideas, doubt themselves, start over, then stall some more. Two days before the competition, Lance is thinking like a jazzman.

"I just gotta speak it, right?" he asks Moore. "I don't gotta show no proof I wrote it down?"

"No, you don't," says Moore. "But that line of questioning makes me very suspicious."

Now it is Saturday morning, and between the cafeteria tables of Bravo High, Lance is still trying to come up with something to say. The speeches can be about anything. "What works, I hate to say, are ghetto stories," Moore says. He has tried not to dictate that, figuring the kids already bear enough burdens without him imposing an identity. With less than an hour to go, though, Lance recognizes that autobiography is his only hope. All he has to do is talk, tell a story he already knows. He tries to practice. "When I was nine," he begins, then blanks, collapsing in nervous snorts. He tries again, to the same results. "I don't want to do this," he cries. "I want to go home now." During the contest, the kids are sequestered. Not even Moore can accompany them. Lance trudges up the Bravo stairs. When he returns, he has his mojo back. "Had them laughing," he says, as if he had known it all along. "Had them gasping."

By afternoon, all the Jordan kids are on a high, a fusion of jitters and exhaustion and relief. As they return, one by one, to the cafeteria, they cheer each other like conquering warriors, with whoops and barks and falsettos, no matter how any of them fear they have done. This is the first test, and the kids from Watts have lived to tell about it: They want everyone to know that Jordan, the long-shot team, is in the house. "Jordan—whoo, whoo!" they holler at anyone who passes. "Represent—whoo, whoo! Watts—whoo, whoo!" They are so loud, so taunting, that other teams begin to stare, baffled by what could be worth such revelry. "It's starting to sink in how important this job is," Moore says. "These kids are looking for a way out." There is still another Saturday to go, and scores will not be available until a few days after that. But the Jordan kids, if they started the day cowed, are determined to end it with bravado. They pose for photos with their fingers cocked in the shape of *W*s, the gang sign for Watts. They break out Sharpies, usually contraband on a school campus, and autograph each other's shirts. Ana Lilia writes "Weird Ass 4-Eva." Around the stems of the *W* she draws swirls and spires, transforming the letter into a pair of Watts Towers. "We're such fools," says Lance, still howling with Jordan pride as he heads for the car. "I'm going to remember this day for a long, long time."

For the final Saturday of decathlon, the team gets its jackets. The kids had been promised the letterman kind, all blue wool and white leather, just like those awarded to last year's squad. But the school has balked at the $2,400 price tag. Each student is given a nylon windbreaker, with a bulldog, Jordan's mascot, embroidered on the back. Lance's is a medium. He ordered an XL. "Why I gotta have the young jacket?" he complains.

The bigger letdown is the China trip. To cover the cost of ten students, plus two coaches, the team would have needed to come up with $24,000, a preposterous sum. Moore believed he had a commitment from the principal to cover at least half that amount, but with the first semester now over, it appears the pledge is to merely help raise funds. Moore blames himself for not taking more initiative; it is not like he ever solicited a donation. But he blames the school for getting everyone's hopes up—for luring these kids in—then dumping the burden on the team. "Now I really hate academic decathlon," Moore says.

The meet concludes at UCLA, a setting intended to inspire. In their team jackets, already coming undone at the seams, the Jordan kids are again feeling out of place. Other schools are outfitted in stylish and elaborate gear, including El Camino, whose silky bomber jackets are inscribed with a motto, written in Bengali, the meaning of which the team has vowed to keep secret until after the nationals in late April. While Moore checks in, his kids line up for a breakfast buffet, piling their plates with doughnuts and bagels. They find themselves standing next to students from Marshall High, whose coach is admonishing them not to fill up. "A fat dog don't hunt," he says. Like the week before, Jose Merino is there for moral support, his own or his teammates'. This time he is equipped with a Sony PSP and is furiously tapping his way through a baseball video game. "I'm contracted with the Yankees right now," he says without looking up. "But I tore a hamstring. They sent me down to the minors."

If the first Saturday was cathartic, the second is a slog. Between 9:15 and 2:25, the decathletes take seven half-hour tests, the standardized events, and then at 4 p.m., just when their spirits are close to breaking, they are led into a final round of Super Quiz—the only public portion of the entire competition—to be broadcast live on L.A. Unified's TV channel. The testing is done in the Grand Ballroom of Ackerman Union, at long tables covered in blue cloth. Attendants shuffle the students, more than 500 of them, so that nobody is next to a teammate. An armed campus policeman stands guard. The Marshall coach is again rattling off instructions: "Concentrate, focus, trust your instincts." Moore gives his own version of advice: "If you're running out of time, guess. *B* is an excellent answer." A perfect score in each event is 1,000 points. Because only the top two scores in each GPA range are counted—in other words, six of a school's nine decathletes—the most a team can amass is 60,000 points. Even powerhouse schools fall short of that mark. Taft last year won the national championship with 51,659 points—an 86 percent average. Jordan finished with 23,060. "What did they get for winning?" asks Zindy. "Nothing? You mean, there's no cash? It's just to show they're intelligent? Oh my gosh!"

There is little for the coaches to do now. Moore finds a couch and flips open a book about the French and Indian War. Jose Merino sits next to him, their knees almost bumping. Within a few minutes, Moore's head has dropped, his breathing gone heavy, the book sprawled across his belly. Jose, thumbs still blazing, is batting .327. He has, at last, made it to the majors.

When the kids stagger out, they look beat. They scratch their heads, crack their spines. Moore tries to stoke them for the finale.

"You guys have been through the worst of it," he says.

"We're the worst—what?" says Manuel.

They have an hour to prepare for Super Quiz. Most of the material was covered in the morning, but ten questions have been saved for the cameras. Ana Lilia, the only one who has brought a study guide, begins reading out loud: "Whereas meteorology focuses..."

Lance is trying to listen, but too many kids are goofing off, drowning her out. "Y'all some inconsiderate bastards," Lance says.

Ana Lilia continues: "...on more short-term weather systems, climatology..."

This time Lance interrupts. "You're reading too fast," he says. "I can't comprehend."

Ana Lilia picks up again: "...involves the study of..." Jose Mendoza snaps her with a rubber band. "*Listen*," Gabby implores. Ana Lilia tries once more, but at this late hour, they are succeeding only in driving themselves crazy. "Just as long as we don't come in last, I'd be happy," Gabby says. "As long as there's another school below us—if we could beat, like, two schools, I'd be so happy. At least we tried."

Outside the John Wooden Center, they line up, still dressed as they began the day. Other schools, anticipating the theater that is to come, have busted out the regalia: leis, capes, pom-poms, pennants, silk Chinese robes, and skullcaps with fake Chinese braids. Lance asks if they can repeat their Jordan war cries. "I think that's kind of been our thing so far—loud and obnoxious," Moore says. "We should go with our strengths." The hardwood of Collins Court, where the women's basketball and men's volleyball teams play, is covered with plastic. Every school has three folding chairs, along with its name affixed to a stake, so that the arena resembles a political convention. While their teammates look on from the bleachers, the Honor, Scholastic, and Varsity divisions will take a turn in the seats, penciling in their answers on a Scantron sheet. "What if we get there and don't nobody answer no questions?" Lance asks. "Can't we use some gang signs to help each other, like 'Grape Street' means 'biosphere'?"

The quizmaster, KTLA anchor Emmett Miller, praises the kids for tackling such a timely subject—though he does raise a few eyebrows when he refers to the theme as "climactic" change. "So," Miller asks to thundering cheers, "should we start?" The B students go first, Manuel, Sara, and Jose Mendoza. Miller reads the question: "What percentage of energy on earth is supplied by the sun?" The students have seven seconds to mark their sheets. A proctor assigned to each school reviews their answers, then raises a placard—like ring girls at a boxing match—to indicate the number correct. All the Jordan kids have it right: "99.9 percent." The crowd is giddy, stomping and clapping. Jordan nails some more, about the Gulf Stream, about the earth's tilt, and about crystallized pack rat urine, which serves as an environmental time capsule. Who knew the kids had absorbed this much? "This is better than last year," says Moore, suddenly buoyed. The C students, Lance's group, are next. They flounder, never getting more than a single correct answer on any question. The A students, led by Ana Lilia, finish stronger. When the Super Quiz scores are posted, Jordan has 30 points out of a possible 60, putting the team squarely in the middle of the pack. "That's hella good," screams Lance, thrilled to learn that the broadcast will be repeated several times. He had come to UCLA dejected; he had promised to visit his mom at her treatment center this afternoon, not realizing the competition would wipe out the entire day. "I'm calling everyone and their mama, literally," Lance says. "Tell 'em, 'Watch yo' boy.'"

It is six, dark already, by the time they step out of the gym. Moore's head is spinning—all the months of worry, the disappointments, his ridiculous quest to be Most Improved again, and now a respectable showing in their one moment onstage. Maybe the Jordan kids had risen, after all, to the occasion. "You guys did great," he tells them.

Lance offers his hand. "*You* did it, Moore."

The awards banquet is Tuesday, in the Convention Center, three days to wait and wonder. Dinner is free for decathletes and coaches but $30 for family and friends. Nobody from Jordan brings a guest. As they enter the tent of glass and steel on Figueroa, the kids are reminded of an ill-fated excursion to these halls last year, to a college fair that ended in a brawl. "Hey, Mr. Moore, Mr. Moore?" says Manuel, a little too pleased. "We got kicked out of here one time." In the Concourse, they find round tables and white linens, uniformed waiters, and a slice of cheesecake at every setting. A judge from the speech competition recognizes Lance, telling him what a good job he did. "A man's job," says Lance, pumping his fist. "If I get a medal, boy, I'll be wearing it all day—no, all *week*."

It takes forever to hand them all out—individual awards, team awards, division awards, gold, silver, bronze—with the same schools, over and over, cleaning up. Super Quiz goes to El Camino. Literature goes to Granada Hills. Social science goes to North Hollywood. The Jordan kids may someday understand that the contest was its own reward, that the mere act of entering the arena elevated them, but at the moment what they see are rich-kid schools, from parts of town they have never been to or heard of, confirming all their inadequacies. "It's rigged, that's all I have to say," grouses Manuel. The field opens up only during the subjective events, which by their nature cannot be rigidly scored. The first of them, interview, generates dozens of medals. Gabby hears her name called: Silver! She gasps and covers her mouth. The event—an informal conversation with the judges—rewards enunciation, gestures, rapport, and conviction. Jordan never practiced it. Gabby returns from the stage, flushed, and passes her prize around the table. It breaks the monotony, but soon the team is bored again, biting fingernails, chewing ice, making catapults of their silverware. Kevin mixes a witches' brew of condiments in his water glass and dares someone to drink it. Manuel goads him to build a figurine out of butter balls. "Make a snowman, Kevin," he says. "Make a *butter* man!" They sit through essay, economics, math, art, music. Hours go by. Even Moore looks like he wants to start a food fight. His girlfriend has often reminded him that the reality of their work is not the same as Hollywood's perception, that teachers do not wave magic wands and, overnight, turn underdogs into superstars. "It brings to the forefront: How do you feel successful?" Moore says. "How do you feel successful in teaching? How do you feel successful in anything?" The kids from decorated schools are now wearing so many medals that they clank every time they walk. On the white tablecloth, Kevin writes: "Kevin was here." The last event is speech. As with interview, the judges are generous—more than a hundred decathletes win medals. Lance is not among them. He gets up and heads for the bathroom. It is like attending a party in your honor, only to discover you are not on the guest list.

Still, there are more awards, Coach of the Year, Most Valuable Decathlete, Inspirational Participant, and finally the cumulative awards. To spare the lower-performing schools any more humiliation, L.A. Unified announces only the top 15 teams, led this year by Granada Hills. By now it is clear that Jordan has not won Most Improved—that award went to Dorsey—but to find out where his team stands, Moore will have to pick up a packet in the lobby. "Get it, get it, get it, get it," Ana Lilia says. He opens the manila envelope and pulls out their score sheet. The kids close in around him, eager, fretful, confused. Moore is telling himself not to care, that no number should define their entire season, but it is their only tangible measure—the final accounting of what these kids have endured. The paper says 21,569. Ana Lilia is the team's top scorer, followed by Sara, then Lance. Moore stares at the number. Only he knows what it represents. Rather than improving, Jordan has slipped 1,500 points, dropping the team from 49th place to 55th. Back where they started.

Everyone wants to take one last picture. Moore, struggling to put on a good face, squeezes in with the team. "Where's Lance?" he asks. Nobody knows. They check the bathroom. They circle through the banquet hall. Nothing. It is 10 p.m. already. "This is great," says Moore, knowing he is stuck downtown until Lance decides to show himself. He heads for the garage, praying and cursing. He walks through the exiting traffic. He squints between glare and darkness. Behind a pillar, back pressed against the concrete, Lance is sulking, hands stuffed in his pockets. "Are you okay?" Moore asks. "Yes," Lance says. "Do you want to talk about it?" Moore asks. "No," Lance says. There is no comfort offered, none desired. Lance is silent, biting his lip, swallowing hard, all the way to Watts. Before walking up the stairs to Granny's apartment, he finally unclenches. "Tell me," Lance says, "why shouldn't I be ashamed?"

* * * * *

A month later, on a blazing Sunday afternoon, Moore invites the team over for a barbecue. He and Espino live in half of a 1920s Spanish-style villa, with arches and bougainvillea and leaded glass, near MacArthur Park. They share it with four cats, one bunny, and Espino's friend, the veterinarian-in-training.

Lance has begun dating a girl, a Salvadoran, who lives in Jordan Downs. Her mother has even invited him over, making *pupusas* for the occasion, but not without subjecting him to a million translated questions: "What was my race? What was my culture? Was I like the rest of the boys out there?" He is wearing his team jacket today, the only kid at the party to do so. He has also brought along two new recruits, including a boy named Slow Mo. "This next year's going to be a good year," Lance says. "My year of redemption."

The old Moore would have thought it creepy to have students at his house, to share personal space like this, but as he stands at the grill, flipping hamburgers, the coach looks more like a proud father. These kids, for all their shortcomings, did it—they came and they tried and, more than his hotshots the year before, turned themselves into a team—just as he had always hoped. "If they stick this out," Moore says, "we'll have a strong team for years to come." But life is changing. Moore has decided to ask Espino to marry him. For as long as he can remember, he has been the kind of guy who leaves girls before they can leave him: Better to hurt than to be hurt. "I think he's learning that he can't detach himself as easily as he did before," says Espino, who is 26 and ready to start a family. Throughout the school year, Moore has been putting money in a ring fund. At the end of March—in a couple weeks, really—he is taking Espino to Jamaica, to surprise her with his proposal. There is just one snag, his passport, a document he has not yet secured. Although every piece of ID says "Moore," his birth certificate says "Rice"; he has had to obtain a sworn affidavit from his mother, dredge up old yearbooks, and trust that a backlogged federal agency will be competent enough to expedite his application. "A typical Mr. Moore situation," he says.

If he marries Espino, one other thing will change. Next year will be his last at Jordan, his last in L.A. Their housemate, who set off the chain reaction that brought them all south, will be done with vet school. Espino's commitment to her will be fulfilled, as will Moore's motive for teaching in Watts. They both have elderly parents in the Bay Area and agree it would be a saner place to raise children of their own. That leaves just one more season of decathlon. Moore wants it to be great—a final shot, maybe, at Most Improved—but he knows how false that sounds. There is a reason L.A. Unified has to hire 6,000 new teachers every year. "People are always letting these kids down," Moore says, "and here I am, ditching out on them." He hates the way that makes him feel. ■