

Running It Back

A short story by Henry Cavanaugh



Hector had never really been into football. He'd been a drama nerd back in high school and the jocks had taken great pleasure in giving him a rough time. As far as he was concerned football players were overpaid and undereducated. Unfortunately though, Hector worked in an office dominated by men who were about ten years his junior (not that thirty-nine was *old*, in his humble opinion) and as such he'd begrudgingly taken a passing interest in the sport, as it was pretty much the only topic of conversation from August when the pre-season started all the way up to the Super Bowl in February.

With summer rapidly approaching and the standard Texas heat creeping hotter by the day, it wasn't unheard of for the army of office drones to take their lunch breaks outside. According to conversations Hector had overheard around the office in recent days, the NFL training camps would be starting up soon and that had encouraged some of his coworkers to bring in footballs to throw around during the break. Although he had never been much of a sports guy, Hector had been told by his superiors that he needed to "be more present within the team" if he wanted to be considered for a promotion, so he figured there couldn't be too much harm in throwing some ball around. It was probably a safer option than joining them for their Friday night drinks so *what the hell*, he'd cut loose and have a bit of fun.

In no short order though, it soon became clear that his coworkers weren't all just treating it as a bit of afternoon fun on their lunch breaks. Hector had gravitated towards the three guys in cubicles closest to his: Nolan (who doubled as a model), Jake (who was dating the CEO's niece) and Francis (who regularly reminded them that he could have gone pro if it wasn't for a knee injury). Only Nolan seemed somewhat understanding of Hector's lack of coordination and willing to joke along with him about it. In sharp contrast, the usually carefree duo of Jake and Francis had an intensity in their gaze as they passed the ball between them and every time Hector fumbled a catch (which was sadly more often than he caught it cleanly) he could swear that a look of

disappointment or even a scowl would cross over their faces. *I won't be making the office football team any time soon*, Hector joked to himself, right as Francis pulled back his arm and prepared to throw.

"Hey Hector, go long!" the other exclaimed as he sent the ball rocketing out of his hands and far into the distance. Hector took off at a sprint, chasing the furious missile, but his heavier-set body wasn't made for such cardiovascular exertion and he was forced to slow to a pained jog as he wheezed for breath. Once upon a time he had been pretty spry on his feet but that may as well have been a hundred years ago given his current decidedly unathletic condition. Finally scooping the ball up in his hands, he glanced all the way back at where his younger coworkers waited for him and shook his head with a heavy sigh. *Young whippersnappers*, he thought in faux sardonic fashion as he began his slow trudge back, shamefully red in the face and feeling sweat in places it really didn't need to be.

Once he was in range, he threw the ball over to Jake - who caught it perfectly with one hand, the bastard - and then began his retreat towards the office. "That's enough cardio for me this month," he remarked with an apologetic grin, "I'll leave you stud athletes to it!" His joke was met with gentle chuckles but he could swear that there was a fleeting moment of disappointment in Nolan's eyes before it was quickly brushed away.

Thankfully it wasn't long until madness had once again broken out in the office and the weirdness of their lunchtime activity had all but been forced out of Hector's mind. A whole stack of reports had ended up on his desk and his boss had been very clear about the fact they needed to be done as soon as possible. Much to his surprise, Nolan swung by about an hour after their return to the office and offered to help out. He'd finished up his own work and could see the grizzly pile decorating Hector's desk, so apparently thought to do a good deed. It came as something of a surprise, but not an unwelcome one. Hector had never really made an effort with his coworkers before and they had left him alone in turn. He supposed they always perceived him to be the boring older dude, but his attempt to play football with them had seemingly brought him to Nolan's notice at the very least.

Later that evening though, those surprising insecurities about his age and body began to creep up on Hector again, leeching onto his mind like a parasite. There he was, brushing his teeth before bed, when he happened to glimpse himself in the mirror and for the first time in a long while felt a flash of sudden disappointment at what he saw there. Sure, he wasn't horrific to look at, but he was a long way from his brief days as a leading man in school productions and he was definitely looking every bit of his thirty-nine years. Between working a full-time job, raising his young children and looking

after his adorable pet dogs he didn't have much time to really focus on himself, and any time he did have he'd rather spend relaxing rather than working on his body. It was way too late in his life to make any drastic changes to his appearance - there was no way he could get big and muscular like Fracis, or even slim and toned like Nolan, nor did he think that slimming down would actually do him any favours. He had an average dadbod and he'd have to settle for it, even if he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to have abs, or watch mountains rise as he lifted his arms into a double bicep flex. *Maybe in another life, eh?*

Even as he slept he wasn't capable of escaping the nagging thoughts that had laid root in his mind, as he was carried all the way back to his high school years and a moment that he had long since forgotten. There he was in the football coach's office, shaking with nerves and fearing that he was about to get strong-armed into tutoring some idiot football jock 'for the good of the school'. After all, as was typical for a proud traditional Southern town like his, the football team was pretty much the most important thing to the school. Screw all the other clubs, the football team was its pride and joy and everybody knew it. Like many of the other kids at his school, Hector had always resented that.

His expectation of being manipulated wasn't met; what the coach had said to him instead was nothing short of bewildering. "You've got good legs, kid. That sprintin' back in class was better than some of our best runners. We could use a guy with your speed on our team," he began his pitch, his stern features relaxed into a softer expression, which was a first as far as Hector could remember. "Now I know football probably ain't your thing but you should really think about coming along to a practice. I think you could surprise yourself! I'm not jokin', kid. I've got an eye for talent and you're it."

Back then Hector had dismissed him with nervous laughter and excuses of needing to keep up to date with his homework, as well as learning lines for the next theatre production the school was putting on. He simply couldn't imagine himself on the football team, plus he couldn't help but think of the consequences of such a decision. He couldn't comprehend the idea that the jocks would accept him on their team willingly and he'd certainly have alienated his friends on the drama club if he was to drop out of the upcoming production to throw around a football instead. In all the years since then he'd never thought twice about turning down the opportunity - until that very night. What if he *hadn't* dismissed the coach's offer so quickly and instinctively? What if he'd actually decided to see if the coach was right and put his sprinting legs to proper use?

As the dream continued, Hector was besieged by the endless possibilities of what might have become of him if he had made the other choice and, even though he was vaguely

aware of its nature as a dream, he felt like he was truly experiencing the rapid rise to popularity that came with joining the football team. He beamed with pride as his teammates slapped him on the back in the locker room and his father even had tears in his eyes when he announced how proud of his son he was for stepping out of his comfort zone. Everything about the dream felt so real: pulling on the cleats, tearing across the field with defenders falling behind him, hoisting the championship into the air as the team's star running back...

Everything about the dream was so overwhelming that by the time Hector was jolted awake by his shrieking alarm he was actively disappointed to find himself right back in reality. There was no time to dwell on things that had never happened though. He was a working father with responsibilities and that meant mornings were chaotic at the best of times. He had to make sure everyone was fed, the dogs were walked and everything was set up for the rest of the day to run smoothly. Luckily he had years of experience when it came to the morning rush and was capable of abating some of the stress but he wasn't quite as focused as he should have been that morning and he knew precisely why. Hector wished he could say that his dream was all but forgotten when he finally got into his car and began the drive to the office for work, but he had worked up such a sweat that he couldn't help but think how much easier completing the tasks on his chaotic morning schedule would have been if he was in better shape, and that journey could have all started back in high school if he'd just listened to the coach.

When his dreams for the following week all revolved around that same topic though, Hector was getting curious. Why was his psyche so caught up on something that had never happened and never would? It was even beginning to affect him during his working day too, certainly not helped by Jake and Francis regularly discussing football stats. Even Nolan was joining in on the conversations and Hector was left so unfocused that his usual work focus was entirely absent. He was late in returning a number of incident reports and even snapped at his supervisor's assistant when they came to collect a file Hector hadn't finished with. As such, when the supervisor extended a polite invitation for the two of them to get drinks together after work that day, Hector already had a pretty good idea he knew what they were going to be talking about.

"We've been friends for how many years now, dude? Three? Four?" the heavily bearded older man began as soon as the two of them were seated at a bar and nursing a bottle of beer each. "I know when something's up with you, man, and there's definitely something fucking with your head right now. Talk to me, buddy." John Hardwood had always been a calming presence in the chaos that was their office, so much so that the more immature guys quickly learned that making euphemistic jokes about his surname got them nowhere. John had never been shy about discussing the issues he had

struggled with in his life and he used those experiences to express how he believed people could overcome adversity. He always saw the best in people and *wanted* the best for them too. It was what had made him such a good boss and an even better friend. Of course, that didn't mean that Hector felt any better about opening up about something so *embarrassing* - because really, the thoughts he'd been having couldn't be described as anything other than embarrassing considering he was a grown man with a family - but he also knew well enough that John wasn't simply going to let it drop. He was stubborn like that.

Still, Hector could be stubborn too. He managed to beat around giving a proper answer until they were both two beers deep and he was a little more loose-lipped. "It's silly, really," he started with a heavy sigh, "Actually, scratch that. It's fucking *dumb*." He chuckled at his own awkwardness. Why were they even having this conversation? "I've just been having a bunch of dreams where instead of doing one thing with my life I did another and then with all the football talk in the office it's just been weighing on me, I guess. Like I said, it's dumb. You know, forget I ever said anything. Can we pretend this conversation isn't happening right now?"

John's dark eyes were narrowed and his lips drawn into a thin line but the silence he left screamed volumes to Hector's overacting mind. *Oh good, he now thinks I've finally gone crazy*. "I don't think you're crazy," the other man denied suddenly, prompting Hector's stomach to twist in a knot. If he had any belief in magic or the supernatural he might suspect that John could read minds; unfortunately he knew it was just that he was too telling with his expressions. It was one of the things that made him such a terrible liar. "I'm just trying to get my head around the connection between you 'taking a different path' and all the football talk. Are you meaning to tell me that you could have been a football player?" After a brief moment of hesitation where he contemplated just how bad the mocking that would surely follow was going to be, Hector nodded sheepishly. "*You*, a football player?" And then, as if the incredulity wasn't obvious enough: "Hector Westbrook, playing football?" At that, John broke into a laugh and clapped a hand down on Hector's shoulder. "Well shit, that's not something I expected to hear today. You are just full of surprises, my friend!"

Of course, as luck would have it, the television above the bar just happened to be playing a rerun of a football game from the previous NFL season. The Carolina Panthers were taking on the Atlanta Falcons and a Panthers player with the number '22' on his jersey was sprinting across the field towards the end zone, the ball in hand. "Hey, laugh it up all you like, for all we know that could have been me!" Hector retorted, even though he felt like an idiot for saying it. Even back in high school he wasn't sure he had ever run quite as fast as #22 there was, and he watched in amazement as the running

back finished off his run with a dive over the last remaining defender that sent him rolling into the end zone for a touchdown.



John, attention now on the game, merely scoffed. “You think you’d make half the player that Christian goddamn McCaffrey is? You really *have* gone off the deep end now, Westbrook.” The comment provoked a deep flush in Hector’s cheeks. Even though it had been the talk of the office for months he really hadn’t been invested enough to know who the hottest new players were. He didn’t know who this McCaffrey kid was, although the wall of text proclaiming the numerous records the young player had broken and his running and receiving yards for the season certainly suggested he was something of a big deal. *Okay, so maybe I wouldn’t have been quite as good as him...*

“It’s only natural to wonder what life would have been like on the road not taken,” a third voice chimed in, snapping Hector out of his sudden fixation with the handsome young player being featured in a close-up on the television screen. He turned his head to see that the bartender had joined them, himself a younger man with fiery red hair and kind hazel eyes. His voice was velvety smooth and even though his remark confirmed that he’d been listening into their conversation, Hector didn’t feel affronted by it. “In fact, it would be weirder if you were so content with your life that you never stopped to think about what could have been. Humans are always conditioned to wonder ‘*what if...*’”

“I don’t dislike my life or anything,” Hector insisted, looking between the bartender and John. “Let’s not turn this into a therapy session or anything, yeah? I’m happy with how

things turned out. I don't sit at home thinking about how much better my life would be if I was Christopher McCormack--"

"Christian McCaffrey," the bartender corrected.

--Yeah, him. It really doesn't bother me that much. Promise." It was strange though because Hector could no longer tell if he was trying to convince the other two men or himself. If it didn't bother him so much then why had he been in such a turbulent mood for the past week since the dreams had started? Why had he scowled and muttered about his grievances whenever any of his coworkers brought up who they thought were going to be the teams to watch going into the 2021 season? Why was he even sat in a bar talking about it with his boss and a complete stranger? Surely all of those things had to add up to something.

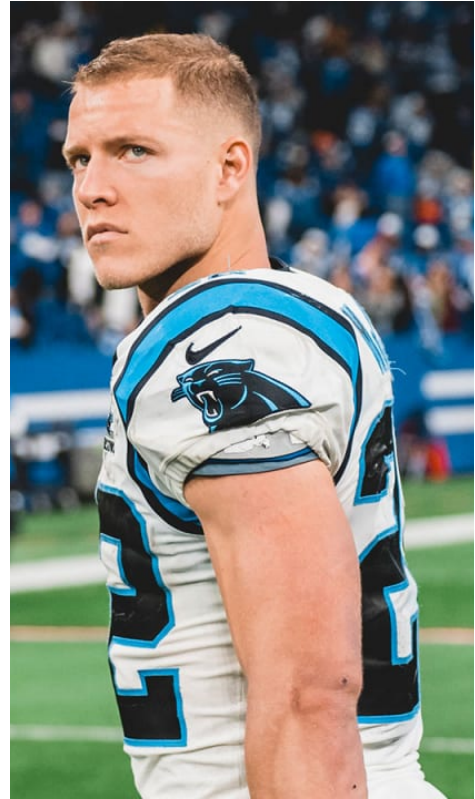
"But, hypothetically," the bartender began, a golden light glinting in his eyes, "If you had the chance to sample McCaffrey's life, would you do it?"

"Of course." Hector had spoken before he could even stop for a moment to think, it had been that instinctual. A few minutes ago and he hadn't even known who Christian McCaffrey was - hell, a few weeks ago and he hadn't been actively thinking about football at all - and now all of a sudden he was admitting that sampling the other guy's life wouldn't be too bad? Yeah, this was definitely the weirdest turn of events in recent memory. Hector was half convinced that everything that had occurred in the past few weeks was a crazy dream in itself; it would certainly explain a lot at least.

The bartender seemed satisfied with his response and flashed him a bright smile. "I'll get you a free drink for your honesty," he announced, already grabbing a bottle from the mini-fridge under the bar as he glanced towards John. "And what about you? Would you try another guy's life on for size?" The bartender slid the bottle across to Hector, who vaguely noted that it was a bright blue spirit-and-soda mix rather than the beer he had been drinking, but at that point he was too buzzed to care. A free drink was a free drink, after all, and he was in no position to complain about a random act of kindness.

The tattooed older man beside him considered the question for a moment before shrugging his shoulder in a dismissing fashion and giving a short sharp shake of his head. "I've barely got my shit together as it is now," he wisecracked in typical John Hardwood fashion, a wry smile decorating his tired face, "Maybe another time?" He too was rewarded with a free drink, only his was just another plain old beer. To be fair, Hector's fruity drink was actually rather nice, the taste of blueberries lingering in his mouth after each swig from the bottle. It even gave him tingles all throughout his body, right from the tips of his toes to the edges of his ears!

The conversation thankfully moved passed football after that, although Hector's eyes continued to be drawn towards the television screen and every time without fail #22 would be right there in the midst of the action, as if he was personally calling to Hector. At the end of the game when the helmet came off and he was able to properly see the football player's handsome visage with his square jawline and piercing eyes the older man felt a surprising pang of jealousy and was glad that John decided that was the perfect opportunity for the pair of them to depart and sleep off the copious amounts of alcohol they had consumed. He'd made a switch from beers to more of those strangely label-less fruity drinks afterwards (he hadn't even noticed that the bartender wasn't even charging him for them) and his body felt like it was humming with energy as he caught an Uber back to his place, whistling the theme music to various classic Nintendo video games all the way.

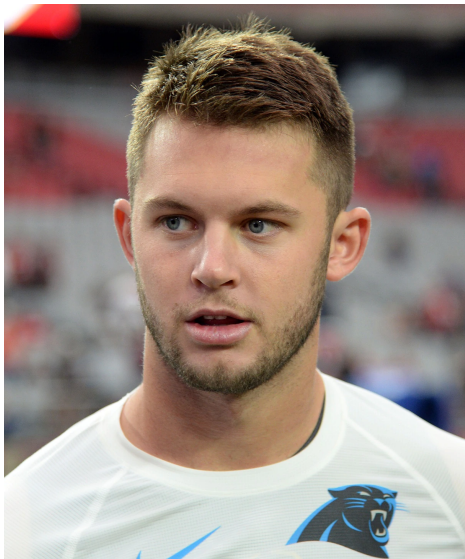


That night, Hector once again dreamt about football, only they weren't the same circumstances he had grown used to from his previous nighttime wanderings. He wasn't playing for his old high school time at all, instead he was playing for the Stanford Cardinals and was an absolute force on the football field, delivering touchdown after touchdown. His powerful legs carried him past every defender with ease and not a single pass aimed in his direction by the quarterback was fumbled or missed. He was lightning in a bottle and it felt damn good to be named MVP of the match when the fourth quarter finally ended with a decisive victory for his team. Of course, the fact that they announced his name as *Christian McCaffrey* rather than *Hector Westbrook* was certainly a point of confusion, but when he was being showered with so much praise and attention it felt impolite to correct them and after a while he was no longer concerned about it. If the dream wanted to present him as Christian McCaffrey then so be it, he'd just enjoy the ride! As such, he was content to merely grin and accept all the love; he even caught the attention of some of the cheerleaders on the side of the field whose eyes were all but firing love hearts in his direction and his cock twitched in delight at the thought of what he could do to them at the after-party should they be willing for a little fun. If this was just a small sample of the kind of life that McCaffrey had lived then of course he wanted more of a taste of it! Who wouldn't?

The pleasurable sensation of lips around his cock startled Hector out of his dreams and before he even opened his eyes he was letting out a low rumble of delight. *What a way to wake up!* It had been years since his wife had started his morning in such a fashion but he definitely wasn't complaining when he was rock hard and already beginning to thrust up into her mouth. As he reached down to run his hands through her hair though, he was greeted by a much shorter cut than he was expecting.

Finally prying open his eyes, Hector could hardly believe what he was seeing. Firstly, the person giving him a delightful bit of morning head wasn't his wife. Rather perplexingly, it was rather a blond male whose features were currently obscured by his position. Secondly, his body looked like a goddamn muscular wonderland! Gone was the 'dadbod weight' that had begun giving him anxieties over the past week: his love-handles were a thing of the past, his round tummy was instead a washboard of cobblestone abs and his soft doughy legs were thick with muscle!

"Um, hi?" he started, surprising himself once again with a voice that wasn't his own. Like the body he was still staring down in amazement at, everything about the voice that had spoken those words was dripping with masculinity, even despite the uncertainty of his tone. "This... isn't how I expected to wake up this morning." *Talk about understatement of the century, Westbrook.*



The comments were enough to get his morning admirer to temporarily detach themselves from his hard length though and lift their head to meet his gaze. Hector felt a flash of recognition when he saw the pretty boy's face, even though he was also sure he had never met the other in his life. How was that even possible?

"Come on, Chris, you know I'm not good at playing the waiting game," the other remarked, casting a breathtaking smirk in his direction. "Besides, don't tell me that this isn't a better way to wake up than what you were expecting." As he continued to search for the stranger's identity, the name *Kyle* flashed in

Hector's mind, although he wasn't quite sure where from. Still, it was undeniable that this Kyle fellow was very good looking and Hector's changed body was evidently all too happy to respond to that. Back during his college days he'd made jokes about "feeling experimental" but he'd never felt it in such an undeniable fashion; he craved the other's lips on him again, as little sense as that made.

Wait a second, did he call me... Chris? The pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place and as Hector felt his square jawline with his hand and then ran it through a thicker head of hair he knew for certain that, despite the impossibility of it, he had woken up in the body of Christian McCaffrey!

His conversation with the bartender the night before and his admission that he would happily sample the other man's life returned to the forefront of Hector's mind, although he strangely failed to remember who he'd originally been at the bar with, or even why he'd actually been there. All he could remember was watching a rerun of the Panthers play the Falcons and seeing himself prove why he was one of the very best in the game at the minute!

No, that wasn't right. He wasn't *really* Christian McCaffrey, he was... someone else. The realization that he couldn't recall his name felt like a slap to the face. How could he have forgotten his own name? *It's Chris, dumbass*, a voice in his head remarked, a voice that didn't sound like his own. The doubts about his identity lingered for a few moments and he did his best to clutch at any memories that might clue him in but they passed through his fingers like mist. He tried to assign himself a thousand names but none of them sat right; none except Chris, of course. His thinking progress was only further hindered by the fact that Kyle's lips had finally returned to his hard cock and he was working in such a masterful fashion that the world around them seemed to hum with raw sexual energy. Chris couldn't think straight, but he also didn't want to when Kyle was making him feel so good!

Strong fingers clutched at the bedsheets as Chris bucked his hips up, pushing more of his hard length between his bedmate's gorgeous lips. Kyle accepted him with a moan of delight and was met in response by a husky growl from the blond running back. His state of delirium continued, sending him spiralling down a whirlpool of memories both familiar and not: graduating Stanford, getting signed by the Panthers, being named a two-time first-team All-Pro after the 2019 season. He could so clearly recall the joy he had felt at each of those achievements so how could they possibly not be his own life experiences?

Chris focused his thoughts on Kyle and found the whole narrative of their relationship returning to him in perfect detail. He'd first met Kyle Allen when the young quarterback had been signed to the Panthers' training team and as two young guys fresh out of college they had hit it off right away. Their friendship was legendary in the locker room but it had eventually spun out into more than that, something neither man had expected given all of their past sexual endeavours were with women. They just seemed to fit

together though and after the first time they'd made passionate love after a particularly gruelling practice session, it was hard for them to stop.

Being from a football family, Chris was well aware of the fact they couldn't be open about their sexual relationship - mainstream sports just weren't ready for that, and besides, neither of them really considered themselves gay so they were happy keeping it on the downlow. Chris had even continued to publicly date women, although none of them were ever capable of pleasing him within the confines of his bedroom like Kyle was. What had begun as a moment of intense adrenaline had continued into something much more and although neither of them had spoken about putting labels on what they were, Chris happily considered Kyle to be his lover. Indeed, an excited chill rushed down his spine as he thought about it; *him, Kyle, lovers*.

As he was brought to careful completion by his best friend and partner in carnal pleasures, Chris let out an almighty roar and lost all control over his hips as he rode out the orgasm. Kyle's hands, one on Chris' muscular quad and the other on his abs, kept him in place as the other's lips remained on his shaft, ensuring that he got every last drop of the running back's release.

Stars swam above Chris' head as he finally started to come down from the incredible high and as his lover cuddled up against his side he felt completely content - calmer, strangely, than he had in a long time. While it wasn't all too fun to remember that the upcoming football season was going to put a little more strain on their relationship given that the Panthers had traded Kyle to the Washington Football Team before the previous season, Chris felt confident that they would find a way to continue making it work.

"Wanna play some video games later?" Kyle mumbled as he peppered Chris' broad chest with fleeting little kisses. "I promise I'll go easy on you." The more muscular man couldn't help but smile down at his adorable quarterback boyfriend, even going so far as to teasingly ruffle the other's hair.

"I've got an even better idea. Why don't we go out and throw some ball instead?" he suggested with a confident grin, "You don't even need to say anything. We both know that football's a better choice than gaming." Chris completely believed that too. As much as he didn't mind the occasional evening playing whatever shooter was the latest craze with Kyle and the rest of the guys from the Panthers locker room, he much preferred keeping himself busy with physical activity: cardio, weightlifting, sex.

In just three seasons playing football professionally he had established himself as one of the best running backs in the whole of the sport and that meant each year the pressure increased. If he wanted to be one of the all-time greats - and he most definitely

did - then he needed to be on top form every single day with no rest and no slacking. His body wasn't a temple, it was a goddamn war machine and it needed to be fuelled properly if he was going to lead his team to a Super Bowl victory in the near future. Of course, it would be a shame that Kyle wouldn't be on the team to enjoy that victory alongside him, but they could always have their own celebration in private once Chris had inevitably been named the Super Bowl MVP.

Meeting Kyle's lips once more in a passionate yet comfortable kiss, Chris took a moment to thank whatever higher power existed for all the blessings he had in life. It had taken hard work and courage along the way but he was glad that he had never strayed from the path that he knew he was destined to be on. He knew from the very bottom of his heart that there was nothing else he would rather be doing with his life - certainly not sitting back and playing video games all day, that was for sure! 2021 had already proven itself to be an unpredictable year but one thing was for sure: Christian McCaffrey was going to keep on winning!

