



McFarland, USA

Family Discussion Guide

SUMMARY

When disgraced football coach Jim White (Kevin Costner), wife Cheryl (Maria Bello), and daughters Julie (Morgan Saylor) and Jamie (Elsie Fisher), are forced to move to McFarland, CA, they face challenges that send them in professional and personal directions that they never imagined. McFarland is a rural town surrounded by acres and acres of farmland from orange groves to fields of lettuce. The residents of McFarland are largely Latino American migrant workers who tend the fields. There is little hope for teenagers beyond this life as they wake early every morning to work the fields with their parents, go to school, and return to the fields in the afternoon.

Coach White accepts a job at McFarland High School as a last ditch effort to rebuild his career. His inability to control his temper caused him to lose two previous coaching jobs. He quickly realizes that the kids aren't suited for football as they're too few and too small. On the other hand, he sees potential track-and-field greatness in them

and puts together a rag-tag group of cross country runners. Although they finish a woeful fourth place out of four in their first competition, with hard coaching, tough love, and the support of the community, they go on to win the inaugural cross country state championship.

While Coach White builds his team, he and his family must adapt to life in a new neighborhood, among a new culture. Coach White, his wife, and daughters learn that appearances can be deceiving as members of the community embrace him and his family with open arms. Though tempted to leave for greener pastures, Coach White stays at McFarland High, building a cross country legacy that included 9 state championships across three decades from the late 80s to early 2000s. All seven members of the first McFarland High School cross country team graduated college, even though none of their parents had attended school past the 9th grade. Most of them returned to McFarland to live and work in the community.



RUN A MILE IN YOUR NEIGHBOR'S SHOES

It can be easy to think we know what other people's lives are like just by watching them. Of course, looks can be deceiving. To better understand another person, we need to walk (or run) a mile in their shoes. When we immerse ourselves in someone else's life and experiences, we can better empathize with them and be better friends and neighbors to them.

This is what Coach White does when he wakes up early one morning to go to work the fields with his cross country team. He learns first-hand just how hard they work and how much their families rely on them. He changes his coaching plans and also comes to a better understanding of just how strong his runners are, each of them possessing gifts that he can't give or coach into them.



Questions for discussion:

- When have you misunderstood or judged someone before you got to know them? Once you got to know them, how did your opinions change?
- When have you “walked a mile in someone else's shoes?”



SACRIFICE FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS

Sometimes, life forces us into difficult situations. We may find ourselves in harm's way protecting a friend or a family member. Risking bodily harm for the safety of a loved one (or a stranger) is perhaps the greatest sacrifice you can make. In the film, when Coach White's team protects his daughter Julie, they put themselves in danger to keep her safe. This changes the way Coach White sees the people in the community around him.

Of course, we can also sacrifice ourselves for others in ways that are less dangerous. It's easy to put ourselves at the center of our own universe. We become obsessed with what we need and what we want. Our lives are full of obligations that demand our attention. However, part of becoming a better person means separating needs and wants and being willing to set aside the things we want to help others have better access to what they need.

Coach White has a dream for his family: a big house, a good paycheck, good schools, etc. In and of themselves, these aren't bad things. However, his pursuit of more and better keeps him from being satisfied with what he has. When Coach White eventually decides to stay in McFarland, he makes the decision to give up these desires in order to serve others who may be in need. Thanks to his decision to stay, countless high school kids have a chance to pursue dreams of their own.

Questions for discussion:

- When and what have you sacrificed for someone else?
- When and what has someone else sacrificed for you?



DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE UNDERDOG

As every race, the opponents of the McFarland High School cross country team underestimate their abilities. The kids at other schools considered their race (ethnicity), their shoddy uniforms, their cheap running shoes, and their out-of-shape teammate. However, all of these surface “imperfections” masked an unbeatable drive and determination to win. Did McFarland win all those races because the other teams underestimated them? Probably not. But we can't discount the element of surprise.

When we only concern ourselves with outward appearances, we miss the most important lesson: it's what's on the inside that counts. Your character, the way you conduct yourself in the classroom or on the field is more important than physical abilities. Without determination, a strong will, a positive attitude, etc. no amount of physical preparation will make up for those in crunch time.

Questions for discussion:

- When have others underestimated your abilities? How did that make you feel? How did you surprise them?
- When have you underestimated others? How did they challenge you?



SEIZE THE MOMENT

In the film, it is clear that Coach White has squandered previous coaching opportunities. Because he let his anger get the best of him, he's been fired twice. Now, he's forced to move to the tiny town of McFarland, where he hopes he can rebuild his career. If he performs well enough here, a better job (along with a better neighborhood) can't be far off.

That better future comes sooner than anyone could have anticipated when the upper class Palo Alto High School offers him a job. If he takes it, we could say that he has made the most of his McFarland opportunity. But he would also be missing another, more important opportunity, the chance to improve the lives of others while building an academic and athletic legacy in unprecedented fashion.

Every day presents countless opportunities to become a better person and to improve our lives. They also present opportunities to help others improve their own lives. When we concern ourselves with helping others, we might just find that our own lives are better for it.

Questions for discussion:

- When have you wasted opportunities? What happened?
- When have you taken advantage of opportunities? How did they pay off?



FAMILY FIRST

In cultures all around the world, family (and children's devotion to their parents) is an integral part of daily life. We see this clearly in *McFarland, USA* as the cross country team works long hours with their parents in the field. Their parents count on their help, and these young men would rather give up running than let them down. They know that their parents work hard and sacrifice to provide them with a better life and a brighter future.

Of course families aren't always perfect, and *McFarland, USA* shows this too. Although our parents might strive to love and understand us as best as possible, sometimes they make mistakes too.

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Questions for discussion:

- Have you ever dishonored your parents? How did you work it out?
- How do you honor your family?



TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN, MUCH IS REQUIRED

McFarland, USA is based on a true story. At the end of the film, we see images of the real McFarland High School cross country team running with current members of the team as the real Coach White pedals alongside them on his bike. As they run, we learn that members of the first team all went to college. Most of them returned to McFarland to work in the school and/or community.

This reminds us of the importance of giving back, of investing in the communities that invest in us. With great success, it might be easy to move “onwards and upwards,” leaving behind everyone who made that success possible. The McFarland High School cross country team didn’t forget.

Questions for discussion:

- Who makes success possible for you?
- How can you give back?



FINISH STRONG

Many coaches are fond of saying, “It’s not how you start. It’s how you finish.” In *McFarland, USA* one of Coach White’s runners learns this lesson in a painful way. At the state championship, one of the team members forgets everything he’s been taught. He looks at his opponents and is instantly fearful. Rather than pacing himself as he’s always done, he breaks into a full sprint to start the race. He gets out front quick, but soon his energy is depleted. The rest of his team must now rely on their slowest teammate to make up the time.

Like the runner in the film, we often lose focus. We have wise parents, teachers, and coaches who help prepare us for life. However, when we’re surrounded by our peers, we often forget their wisdom. We look around us and become afraid—or jealous, envious, or greedy—and worry about running someone else’s race rather than our own.

If we look at our lives like a race, it is important that we finish strong. But it is also important that we pace ourselves by living at a healthy speed and keeping our eyes on the path before us.

Questions for discussion:

- When have you lost focus of where you are going in life?
- Have you ever wanted to live someone else’s life? Why?