

The Irion County football team practices across a chain link fence from my town house. Workouts begin on weekdays close to two p.m. A glance out the office window brings back the old school board warning: "If you don't let 'em play ball, they will drop out of school for sure - never graduate."

Whether they play or graduate does not apply to the adults walking around the football field down in the city park. We hit the track so early that posted rules, marching bands and football players don't bother us.

For example, I lapped the track for three months of mornings before two signs became visible forbidding walkers to use the three inside lanes. Until then, I wondered how to dodge male teenagers slapping rubber soles along my lane, blowing perspiration off the side in streaks, and leaving a boar's odor in the slipstream strong enough to change the season to spring, on lanes one through three.

Once I moved to outside lanes, the traffic aged and grew in size and diminished in aroma. The pace was still too fast. Leashed dogs were some solace. Once the sun arose, the "saucers" with tongues hung way over the lips made it obvious that doctors prescribed the dogs to lose a few pounds from the rich snacks fed hourly.

One small brown terrier, deep in a coat of hair over her face like a blind Angora goat, balked one morning and left the track for grass. I hated to see her and her mistress sidelined. They were the only walkers I could stay close to matching strides with. But the goal wasn't speed, it was to exercise enough to raise my heart rate and improve my strength.

Every visit to the doctor's offices and labs in Angelo, seated among folks faded into a deep hospital pallor, with arms and wrists bloodshot by telltale IV injection sites, makes six laps every morning around the football field seem more like a break for freedom than an ordeal. (Rumors via the bedpan set claim lab technicians lick ... No, I'm not going to be a party to spreading that story.)

However, after you stay a week through one of those vampire hospital episodes, blood tests on the outside may require a bandana for a blindfold and your hind legs hobbled with a cotton rope for the next letting. One family member became so phobic at the sight of white jackets and plastic syringes that a hockey coach had to be consulted on how to unclench his fists after his first test at a walk-in lab. Seems hockey teams suffer lots of locked knuckles from

balling up their fists in cold temperatures to start fights.

At the park's track one big age cut-off occurs on the way into the track on a short, steep descent down an asphalt ramp. Greybeards use a cane to peck down the gravel-coated slope, while the high school students skip down the ramp eager to start a run.

Heat makes us walk early. The disadvantage is that in darkness, you never know who walks the track at the same time. Later in the day, you haven't the slightest idea if the bank teller or the post office agent wished you good morning at five a.m. Also, seen in their exercise costumes of short sleeves and short pants, they look different after daylight in work clothes.

The first Saturday morning after the opening football game, pieces of asphalt paving tennis ball size appeared on the track in front of the visitors' stands. In the dark, the black speckled clods made obstacles to pick the way or kick to the side. No one mentioned the debris.

In two mornings, walkers threw the asphalt out of the way. I tried to estimate how wide the field measured from the home team stand to the visitors' seats to determine which side threw the asphalt.

Sure wouldn't have been any test in the Depression days of my time for an old boy to throw a stick of wood the length of the field, much less an asphalt clod from grandstand to grandstand. So let's skim over the notion that two teams from two country towns might had a rock fight to end the football game.

I think I told you before, the boy who practices trial work in Austin admits that if he becomes mad in the courtroom, first thing, he looks for a rock to chunk just like he did in high school. But today, kids behave different. Word processors can't spell "chunk," much less phrase "chunk a rock." In the 1930s Depression days, a major budget item for the school in Mertzon was replacing broken window panes.

The heat or the football games aren't going to stop the walkers. The habit makes you feel too smug and too special to stop because of a few chunks of asphalt. I am going to check for clods after the next game. Might be able to link the mystery to a locale.