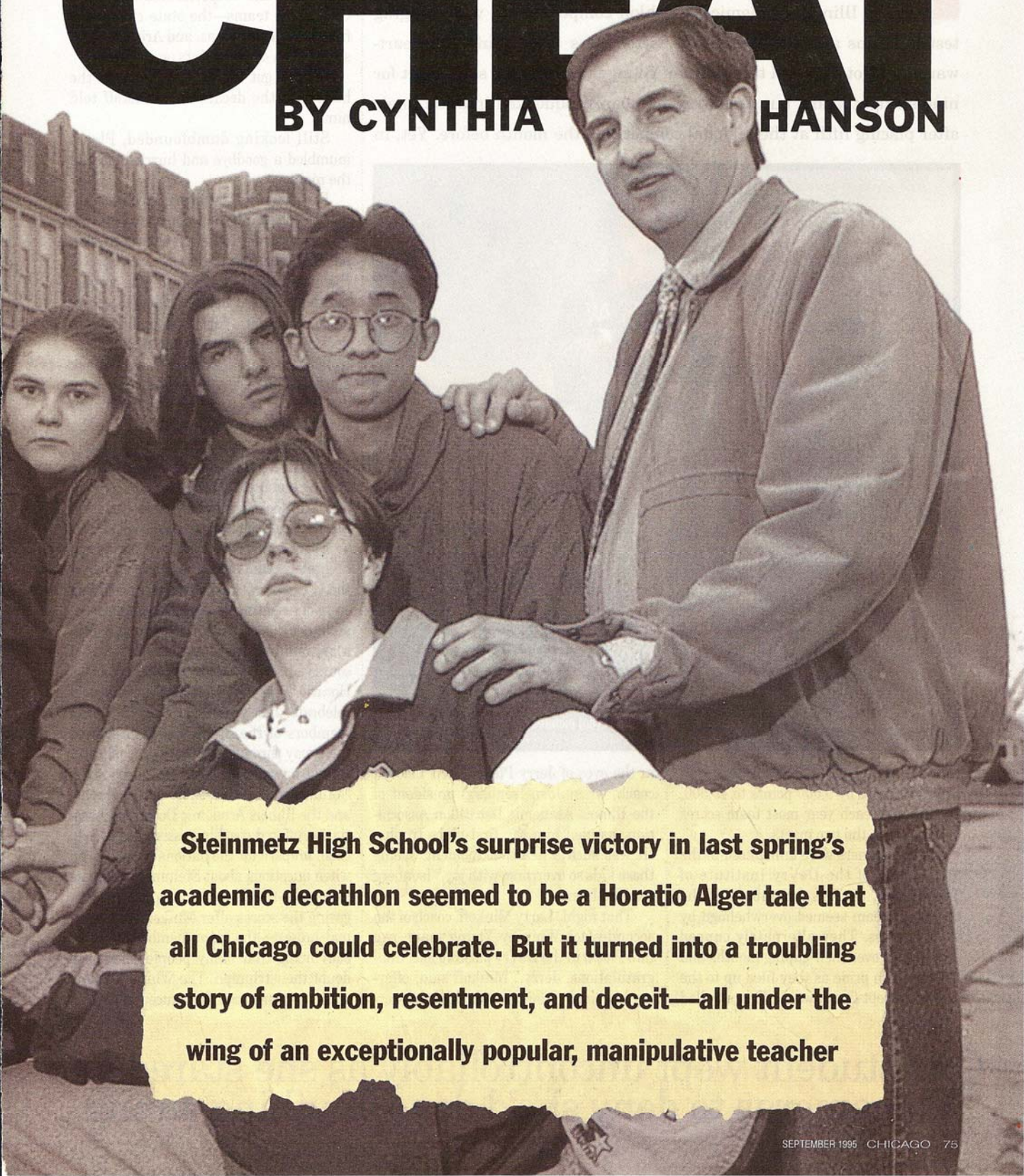
THE BIG

THE 1995 STEINMETZ HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMIC DECATHLON TEAM, FLANKED BY PRINCIPAL CONSTANTINE KIAMOS (LEFT) AND COACH JERRY PLECKI, SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE THE CHEATING SCANDAL UNRAVELED: (TOP ROW FROM LEFT) GREG NELSON, MARGARET RESZKA, CHRISTOPHER BOR, JOLIE FITCH, ERIC KRYSIAK, SCOTT TANDO; (BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT) TOM O'DONNELL, ADAM PAWLUS, AND RODNEY PRZYBOROWSKI

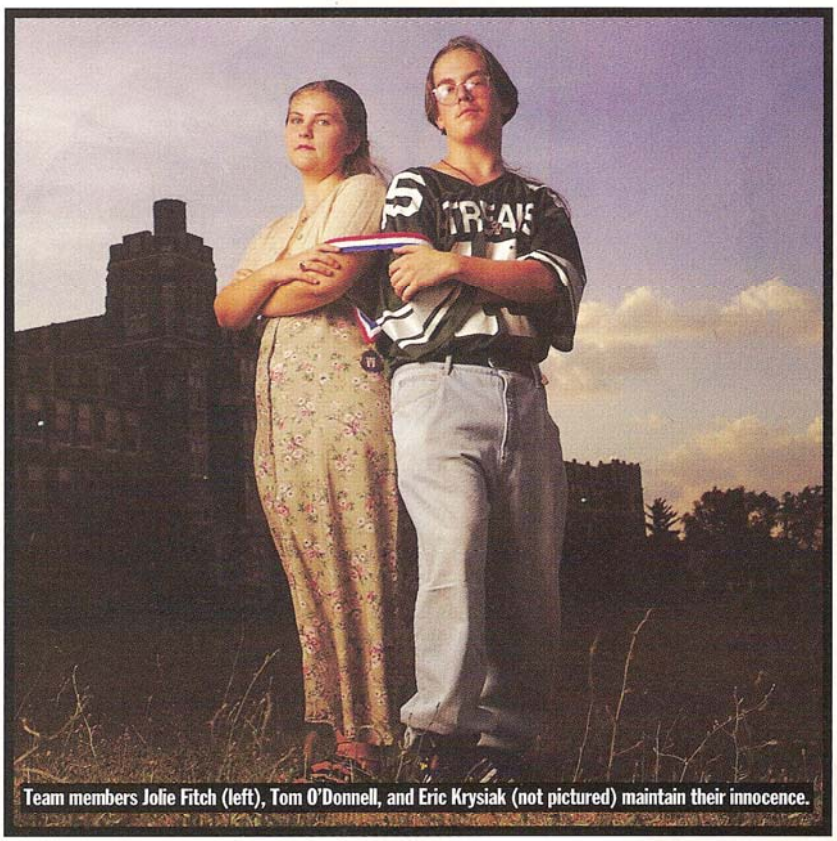
CHEAT

BY CYNTHIA HANSON



Steinmetz High School's surprise victory in last spring's academic decathlon seemed to be a Horatio Alger tale that all Chicago could celebrate. But it turned into a troubling story of ambition, resentment, and deceit—all under the wing of an exceptionally popular, manipulative teacher

People in the audience that March night remember the gush of emotion. Scrappy, blue-collar Steinmetz High School had scored an incredible come-from-behind victory over Whitney Young, the city's most exclusive public high school, in the Illinois Academic Decathlon competition, a wide-ranging test of brains and knowledge. The victory was astonishing and heartwarming: Not only had the Whitney Young team won the state meet for nine straight years, but Steinmetz had barely squeaked into the finals after placing fifth at the regional competition the month before. Yet, in this tougher contest, Steinmetz had raised its score by 9,000 points to 49,500, even though each year most team scores drop between the two meets.



Team members Jolie Fitch (left), Tom O'Donnell, and Eric Krysiak (not pictured) maintain their innocence.

As the winners were announced in the auditorium of the DeVry Institute of Technology, the nine members of the Steinmetz team seemed overwhelmed by their success. They alternately cupped their hands over their gaping mouths and beamed with pride as they filed up to the stage to accept their awards. Tears welled in the eyes of Jerry Plecki, their beloved coach, when Joan Isenberg, president of the Illinois Academic Decathlon Association, handed him the first-place trophy. "It was such a heartfelt moment, seeing those kids so overcome with joy," Isenberg recalled later.

That night, Larry Minkoff, coach of the second-place Whitney Young team, ran into Plecki in the DeVry parking lot. "Congratulations, Jerry," Minkoff said, offering his hand. "You have the highest-scoring team in the country by more than 2,000 points."

Plecki looked confused. "I thought good teams were over 50,000," he replied, apparently unaware of the extent to which Steinmetz had outperformed its rivals. Only three teams—the state champions from California, Texas, and Arizona—had scored even 47,000 points on the exam.

"You've got the greatest team in the history of the decathlon," Minkoff told him.

Still looking dumbfounded, Plecki mumbled a goodbye and hurried off into the night.

For a month this spring, Plecki's glimmer of uncertainty in the parking lot was virtually the only break in what proved to be an astounding façade, a cover-up of a cheating scandal that saw bright, promising students tell boldfaced lies to school officials, lawyers, reporters, and the public. One member of the team wept uncontrollably as she stared into TV cameras to deny she'd done anything wrong. Even today, months after the scandal finally unraveled, many of the people closest to the affair seem traumatized. "If someone were to look me in the eye and tell me it's raining outside, I'd have to go to the window and look for myself," said Constantine Kiamos, the Steinmetz principal.

Interviews with school authorities and Steinmetz team members before and after the cheating was exposed tell a troubling story of resentments, ambition, and deceit, all under the wing of an exceptionally popular, manipulative teacher. At first, of course, it seemed quite another thing—a Horatio Alger tale that all Chicago could celebrate. Just after the contest in March, members of the Steinmetz team smiled their way through a blizzard of congratulatory newspaper and TV interviews. Columnists toasted their achievement, and the Illinois Academic Decathlon Association offered coaching assistance to help them prepare for the national finals. Even when questions about Steinmetz's success emerged—the association began investigating the scores after Minkoff filed a formal protest—the team members were so convincing that many people refused to doubt their triumph. The Whitney Young students were soon denounced as "whin-

One student wept uncontrollably as she stared into TV cameras to deny she'd done anything wrong.

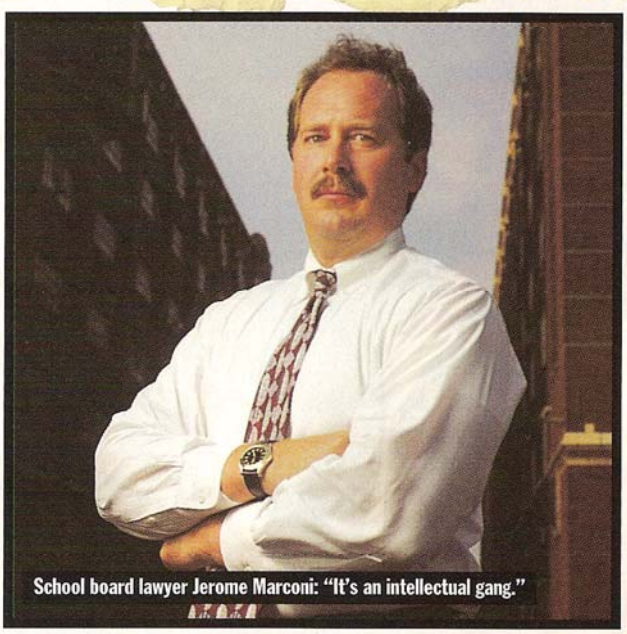
"Dr. Plecki taught us, 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer,'" one student said.

ers" on radio talk shows across Chicago. And Robert Clifford, one of the top personal-injury lawyers in the city, announced he was going to sue to prevent the Decathlon Association from stripping the Steinmetz team of its title. (He never did.)

At the center of the controversy was Plecki, Steinmetz's charismatic coach, who held enormous sway over the students. "They were Jerry's groupies," recalled one of Plecki's former colleagues in an interview. "They kissed his butt and made him feel powerful." The kids themselves are a hardscrabble group for whom the attractions of decathlon success—camaraderie, glory, and possibly even money for college—were extemely alluring. Most live in single-parent homes, in small apartments and houses within steps of gang violence and drug dealing. Several are immigrants who have only recently learned to speak English. In part by cultivating a resentment against the elite students from Whitney Young, Plecki molded the Steinmetz team into such a tight-knit unit that on the few occasions when a shudder of guilt threatened the conspiracy, the group would band together to bolster the lie.

"It's an intellectual gang," said Jerome Marconi, the school board lawyer and former Cook County assistant state's attorney who finally cracked the scandal. "They don't act as individuals. They act as a group. When I talked to them alone, I sensed they wanted to tell me what happened. Then they'd return to the group, as if they needed everyone's consent to say something."

The cover-up finally collapsed because of a few eruptions of conscience and relentless pressure from school authorities. But at press time only six of the nine team members had confessed to cheating. And Plecki had disappeared. "Clearly, you can't program for madness," said Isenberg of the Decathlon Association, once things had settled down. "But I think if we made a mistake, it was being too trusting."



School board lawyer Jerome Marconi: "It's an intellectual gang."

Ironically, officers of the Illinois Academic Decathlon Association had hoped that 1995 would be the year the competition emerged from obscurity. For the students and teachers involved, the grueling series of tests are a near obsession. Medals are on the line and scholarships are at stake. "We thought the decathlon was an investment in Angela's future," said Pamela Tanagi, whose daughter, Angela Lam, competed on Steinmetz's 1994 team. "We spent $6,000 on a computer and encyclopedias so she wouldn't have to spend all her time studying in the library. We were worried about paying for college, so we hoped she'd win scholarships."

Teams have nine members: three with A averages, three with B averages, and three with C averages. Students compete against others of their academic level in multiple-choice, essay, and oral tests that take six hours to complete in each round of competition. Awards are given to the top scorers in math, economics, science, language and literature, fine arts, social science, essay, speech, and Super Quiz, a combined written exam and oral relay on a different topic every year. "As a freshman, I thought, I could never win all those medals," said Tom O'Donnell, one of the three students who deny having cheated. A member of Steinmetz's 1994 and 1995 teams, he was standing in front of his four faux silver and bronze medals, neatly lined up on a desk in the corner of his family's living room—a shrine, of sorts, that is visible from the front door of the apartment. "I joined the team because I really wanted to see how well I could do. I wanted to prove to myself I could win."

It's not unusual for teams to study seven hours a day in the weeks before the decathlon, leaving barely enough time to attend classes and do homework. "It's intellectual masochism," said Maggie Gulbrandsen, a Whitney Young senior, whose mother drilled her on Super Quiz questions every night before bed. Some students are so eager for a competitive edge that they review practice exams and do library research over the summer, even though the first meet doesn't take place until January.

As a rookie Whitney Young coach in 1983 and 1984, Larry Minkoff, now a stocky 53-year-old, convened the team for only six study sessions before the competition—an effort that wasn't enough to clinch the Illinois title. "I felt foolish coming in second," he said. "I realized I hadn't given decathlon the serious attention it required, so I made sure we worked harder." Even after winning the state trophy and doing well at the nationals, Minkoff wasn't satisfied. "I became obsessed with doing better. I decided to select the team in June, give them the syllabus to study over the summer, and hold meetings every day during the school year." Whitney Young has consistently placed in the top five nationally since Minkoff intensified the routine in 1991.

Recruiting is a breeze for Minkoff, partly because the decathlon team at Whitney Young enjoys status usually accorded star athletes. Everyone knows the names of team members, their trophies are displayed in the school's lobby, and the team is sent off to the nationals with a pep rally. "Kids want to join the success wagon," Minkoff said. He paused, then leaned forward, his lips curling into a sly

photography: JEFF SCIORTINO

Steinmetz graduate Angela Lam: "I thought I set the perfect stage for the 1995 team to come clean."

smile as he delivered his sales pitch: "C'mon. I'll take you to the stars. I'll make you a champion. I'll put you on a plane, and I'll put you up in a hotel. You'll be in the newspapers. You'll be famous."

As it turns out, 1991 also was a pivotal year for Steinmetz, which had been sending its team to another competition, the citywide Academic Olympics. That fall, the school switched to the prestigious decathlon, hired a new coach, and watched the team's fortunes begin to change.

"Jerry Plecki is into performances," said his former colleague. "He's lived half of his adult life in the darkness of movie theatres. One minute, he'll imitate Jimmy Stewart as the 'Aw, shucks, ma'am,' down-home kind of guy, and then he'll turn around, twiddle his tie, and do something straight out of Laurel and Hardy. He pretends the camera is rolling and becomes whatever he wants to be."

Gerard D. Plecki—a 44-year-old with a mop of tangled black hair, pale skin, soft brown eyes, and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois—wanted to be an English teacher in 1991. (Plecki did not return phone calls for this article. The following details have been pieced together from his résumé and job applications, and from interviews with school officials, colleagues, friends, and students.) His curious career path did include brief stints teaching college and high-school English. But he is said to have operated a small import-export business, and he also logged nine years in the travel business—first as a travel agent in Mobile, Alabama, and then as the manager of AAA, a travel agency in suburban Mount Prospect. Despite his unusual résumé, Plecki was hired for a $40,000-a-year teaching job with the Chicago Public Schools. He requested Steinmetz, Hugh Hefner's alma mater and, with 2,237 students, the city's sixth-largest high school.

Located at 3030 North Mobile Avenue, in the heart of the ethnically diverse, working-class Montclare neighborhood, Steinmetz is an imposing four-story

photography: JEFF SCIORTINO

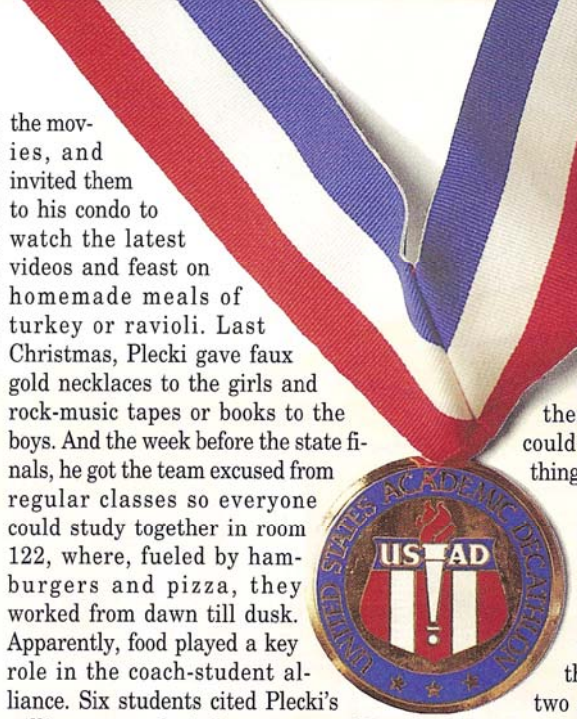
brown-brick edifice that dwarfs the modest beige-brick bungalows and two-flat apartment buildings along the bordering streets. The school's student body is divided about evenly among whites, blacks, and Latinos.

Plecki's background parallels that of the students he befriended. He grew up in a working-class family on the Northwest Side, the eldest of three children born to a Polish factory-worker father and an Italian mother who preached the importance of education. As an adult, Plecki, a bachelor, remained close to his mother and lived in her basement until he bought a condo on the Northwest Side two years ago. By all accounts, Plecki is an affable, bright man. At Steinmetz, he played the role of the disheveled professor, pairing a tweed sports coat with baggy corduroy trousers, a frayed oxford shirt, scuffed Top-Siders, and, oddly enough, a Rolex watch. "He related to the kids—in a way, he was one of the kids," said Constantine Kiamos, the principal. "The attitude wasn't 'Dr. Plecki, our teacher.' It was 'Dr. Plecki, one of our group.'" Plecki shared his students' interest in movies, TV sitcoms, and the Bulls. But his teaching style also made an impression. "Dr. Plecki is one of the best teachers I ever had," said Jolie Fitch, a member of Steinmetz's 1995 decathlon team. "He's good with smart kids, because he teaches just above your level. You have to work."

Soon after his arrival, Plecki volunteered to coach Steinmetz's first academic decathlon team. Instead of promising airplane trips and stardom, he offered something more immediate and irresistible: personal attention and the dream of success. He taught the students to believe in themselves and convinced them the decathlon would impress college admissions officers. He gave them friendship and a group identity. "He was like our big brother," said Tom O'Donnell, who, like other 1995 team members, refused to say anything remotely critical about Plecki. "We could talk to him about anything."

Plecki was particularly close to the 1995 team. He proofread their term papers, bought them dinner, took them to the movies, and invited them to his condo to watch the latest videos and feast on homemade meals of turkey or ravioli. Last Christmas, Plecki gave faux gold necklaces to the girls and rock-music tapes or books to the boys. And the week before the state finals, he got the team excused from regular classes so everyone could study together in room 122, where, fueled by hamburgers and pizza, they worked from dawn till dusk. Apparently, food played a key role in the coach-student alliance. Six students cited Plecki's willingness to feed them as one of his chief attributes. "Jerry plies people with small tokens to win their friendship," his former colleague said. "He'd always have little bags of candy with him. He'd always pass out chocolates. It's part of his manipulation technique. And these kids fell for it. They're very emotionally needy."

Plecki united the decathlon team into what Fitch called "a family. It was all of us, all the time, always together. We were 'Jerry's kids.'" As she spoke, Fitch was slouched on her family's living-room sofa, applying red polish to her fingernails and talking above the squawks of Buddy, Floyd, Hawkeye, and Sara, her caged parrots and macaws. Her dark-brown hair was tucked behind her ears, and she was wearing a baggy, floral-print shirt and denim bell-bottoms. She looked like an ordinary 17-year-old, even though she has insisted she practices witchcraft. "At first, I thought it was weird that Dr. Plecki was so close to the kids," Fitch began. "I didn't think it was appropriate for us to have his phone number and go to his house to study. I mentioned it to [teammate Eric Krysiak], and he said, 'Oh, don't worry. He's not a weirdo or pervert.' So I gave Dr. Plecki a chance. And I ended up liking him. Eventually, I started to believe this guy was an incredible human being." Fitch put the bottle of nail polish on the coffee table. "Anything Dr. Plecki told me, I believed. He could have told me the sky was green, and I would have said, 'OK. The sky is green.' Toward the end, there was a point where he could have told me to do anything, and I would have done it."



By January, Plecki had winnowed the team from 20 to 12 students—nine competitors and three alternates. He realized that this group of seven boys and two girls could make a name for Steinmetz. Three students—O'Donnell, Adam Pawlus, and Margaret Reszka—had been on the 1994 team, and he'd recruited two recent transfer students: Fitch, late of the elite Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, and Eric Krysiak, from the tony Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. (Fitch claims she left the state-funded boarding school in the spring of 1994 because she was traumatized by her roommate's suicide attempt. An academy spokeswoman called Fitch's statement "inaccurate," but declined further comment "for reasons of confidentiality." Krysiak says he earned poor grades at Phillips because he was distracted by his parents' divorce. He did not elaborate on why he left, and a spokeswoman for the prep school would not discuss his departure.) "At first, Dr. Plecki wanted us to win more than I think we [wanted to]," said Fitch. As Plecki predicted, Steinmetz won the season opener—the "cluster" round in which 60 Chicago high schools compete in four preliminary contests—and advanced to the next level. Steinmetz had never before made it beyond the regional competition, but an unexpected fifth-place finish propelled the team into the state finals.

At that point, Plecki reportedly started aggressively bash- *(continued on page 117)*

"Dr. Plecki implied that the other schools cheated, and that we were fools to play by the rules."

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ing Whitney Young, painting that team as Steinmetz's archenemy and strongly suggesting that the magnet school had cheated its way to nine straight state titles. (The Illinois Academic Decathlon Association has found no evidence that Whitney Young cheated in any competition.) "The group mentality became 'Beat Whitney Young, beat Whitney Young,'" Krysiak recalled.

While the team was studying days, nights, and weekends, a Steinmetz freshman not on the team visited his father at his office in the copy center of DeVry, where the exams were stored. When his father was out of the office, the young man scooped up seven written tests and gave them to a friend on the decathlon team. From there, the tests went to another team member, who offered them to Plecki. During the week before the March 11th meet, according to the six students who have confessed, Plecki distributed the stolen exams to the team, saying they were a way for the team to get a "little boost." Some students expressed reservations about cheating, but others were excited at the prospect of unseating Whitney Young. "I took the tests home because I wanted to see if they would be easy or hard," admitted one student, who asked that his name not be used. "I don't know how many other kids took it home, too. But everyone on the team had access to all of the tests."

Plecki's former colleague said she was not surprised that he would encourage cheating. "Jerry has a chip on his shoulder," she said. "He's the type of guy who's angry that life hasn't given him his fair share. He hates 'the system,' so his way of getting even was to have the kids win by cheating. He was like a Boy Scout leader gone berserk."

On March 11th at DeVry, the Steinmetz team—dressed in the blue and green attire that Fitch recommended for luck—accomplished the seemingly impossible: It defeated Whitney Young and collected 46 of the 81 medals awarded for individual achievement in nine events. But the student who gave the stolen tests to Plecki wasn't sharing the thrill of victory. He had wanted to compete, but Plecki had removed him from the team and then persuaded him to pose as a judge in the speech contest "to make sure I kept my mouth shut about the cheating," the student said in an interview. The next day, consumed by guilt and burning with anger at Plecki, the student handwrote a 15-page essay called "Confession." For Plecki and the Steinmetz decathlon team, the trouble was about to begin.

On a crisp, sunny day in mid-April, Constantine Kiamos sat at the conference table in his office and slowly shook his head. It had been a month since the controversy erupted and a week since the scam unraveled with the first tearful confessions. A tall, burly man with a soft, melodic voice and wrinkled brow, he was understandably weary, disappointed, and frustrated. "In my 36 years with the Chicago Public Schools, I have never encountered a group of kids like this," he said. "They not only lied to me, but they lied to the board of investigators, lied to a committee of teachers, lied to everybody who questioned them in this building." Kiamos started asking questions on March 14th, the day after an English teacher turned over "Confession," which described, in rich detail, how a Steinmetz teacher named "Dr. Plicky" had masterminded a cheating campaign. An unsigned cover letter accompanying the essay read, "The following story is true. The names have been somewhat changed to protect the innoc—heck, the names have been changed to protect me. I stress the need for total privacy. Somehow, I have a gut instinct I'm able to confide in you." Under pressure from Kiamos, the teacher revealed the student's name, and Kiamos summoned him to the office.

> "I feel guilty for cheating. I feel guilty for confessing. I feel guilty for *everything.*"

"He was calm, and he even joked about my questioning him," Kiamos recalled. "He said it was fiction, that he wrote it to get back at [Plecki] for leaving him off the state team. I handed him paper and told him to write a statement that the essay was fictional."

By then, the student had told Plecki about the essay. The team immediately huddled to plot spin control. "Dr. Plecki told us that we had to be nice to [the author] and stay friendly with him," Fitch said. "Throughout the entire year, whenever somebody would leave the team, Dr. Plecki would always tell us to stay in contact with them and watch what they did. He didn't want them to stab us in the back. He taught us, 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.'"

Apparently that is what Plecki had in mind when he intercepted the author in the hall and said, according to the student, "We're going to see Dr. Kiamos right now, and we're going to give him the performance of our lives." Fifteen minutes after Kiamos had interviewed the young man, he and Plecki were back in the principal's office, both denying there was any truth in "Confession."

Meanwhile, the executive board of the Illinois Academic Decathlon Association was scrutinizing data from the regional and state tests. Not only did Steinmetz gain an unprecedented 9,000 points, but there also were peculiarities in individual performances. Of the 105 students who competed at the Illinois finals, only 17 correctly answered a calculus problem. All nine of Steinmetz's team got the right answer. Of the 5,000 students nationwide who took the math test, only 12 scored 900 or above. Six were from Steinmetz. On the advice of the national organization, the Decathlon Association demanded that the Steinmetz team take a short validation test. "At that point, I didn't think they cheated," said Joan Isenberg, the Decathlon Association president. "I had seen those kids after the finals, and they looked so overcome. I thought they could repeat."

But the students refused to take the retest, and Kiamos felt obliged to back them. "Each team member believes that to [take the test] denigrates his and her achievement, self-respect, and integrity," Kiamos wrote in a letter to Isenberg. "The position of the students, which is supported by the [Local School Council] and the entire Steinmetz community, is that [the Decathlon Association's] opinions and ruling constitute a capricious and arbitrary 'rush to judgment,' devoid of the protection of the accused to due process."

At a news conference on March 23rd, the Steinmetz team, flanked by Plecki and Kiamos, steadfastly maintained its innocence. Most wore the same defiant expressions they'd turned on for a front-page picture in the previous day's *Sun-Times* that

accompanied an article headlined, "We Didn't Cheat." The impassioned performance worked its intended magic. "To honor the demand for a retest would implicitly accede to the reason behind it—the suspicion that cheating occurred," a *Tribune* editorial declared the next day, echoing widespread sentiment. "But statistical abnormality or not, absent any hard evidence of cheating, the board ought not to have disqualified Steinmetz." The media glow, however, was about to dim.

After a leisurely day of shopping, Angela Lam returned home on March 23rd to find two strangers in her family's Northwest Side apartment. A woman was talking to her mother at the dining table and scribbling in a notebook. A beefy man with a cellular phone and camera stood in the living room. At first, Lam, a soft-spoken redhead with green eyes, thought they were undercover police officers who'd come to make a report about yet another burglary in their apartment building. On closer look, she recognized the woman from the picture above her *Sun-Times* column. "I was petrified," recalled Lam, now a sophomore at DePaul University, "because I knew, immediately, why she was here."

At the invitation of Pamela Tanagi, Lam's mother, Michael Sneed had come to listen to how Steinmetz's decathlon team pulled off a cheating scam at the 1994 regional competition. "I'd heard [the Decathlon Association] was going to revoke Steinmetz's title," said Tanagi. "I thought, That's not enough. Maybe they'd continue to investigate what really happened if they knew about 1994." Tanagi also phoned Kiamos that day to tell him that Lam was talking to the press about cheating.

In the March 26th edition of the *Sun-Times*, Lam, captain of Steinmetz's 1994 decathlon team, admitted cheating on the Super Quiz. Lam's public mea culpa made her an overnight celebrity—she appeared on *Oprah Winfrey* and *The Late Late Show with Tom Snyder,* and *Glamour* magazine invited her to write an essay for its August 1995 issue—and it elicited anonymous hate mail attacking her integrity and even questioning her virginity. As Lam tells it, in January 1994, minutes before she entered the auditorium at Whitney Young Magnet High School for the oral Super Quiz, Plecki smiled sheepishly and slipped her a small piece of paper. "Memorize these," he said, pointing to five letters listed beneath her name. Lam walked over to five of her team-

mates and overheard them joking about winning the Super Quiz. She watched as they answered question after question correctly. "Everybody knew I had the answers, so I couldn't have walked back and said I didn't cheat," Lam explained. "If I'd purposely answered wrong, they would have known that, too." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And they wouldn't elect me Honor Student of the Year if I didn't cheat. I wanted that award. I thought I deserved it." Three days after the competition, Lam suffered a guilty conscience. She cornered Plecki in his classroom and handed him an envelope containing her gold medal for the Super Quiz. When Plecki promised not to cheat again, Lam agreed not to go to the authorities. "Dr. Plecki implied that the other schools cheated, especially Whitney Young, and that we were fools to play by the rules," she recalled.

The next day, Lam received a rambling, two-page handwritten letter from Plecki. "Forgive yourself; and move on," he wrote. "Whatever you as an individual or as part of a team did, or didn't do, on Saturday has now washed back, out to sea. You'll never ride those waves again; there will be bigger ones, different challenges, and many tides along the way. I know you will always keep your head above water."

Before graduation, Lam's and her mother's dreams came true: Lam was elected Honor Student of the Year, and she received a $1,000 college scholarship from the Steinmetz faculty. For 13 months, Lam's cheating was a closely held family secret. "I failed myself," she said in April of this year. "I failed as a leader, as a role model to my teammates. By going public, I thought I set the perfect stage for [the 1995 team] to come clean."

Lam's mother's phone call sent Kiamos back to Plecki. "After three hours of intense discussion, Plecki finally admitted to finding the answers [to the Super Quiz] and giving them to the kids in 1994," Kiamos recalled. "I said, 'What about this year?' And he said, 'No, not this year. Just last year.' So I thought we had a 1994 cheating scandal on our hands."

In a signed handwritten statement to Kiamos dated March 23rd, Plecki contended that he had inadvertently found the answers to the Super Quiz in the Whitney Young team room. "I should have turned the answers in to the contest supervisors, but I knew they'd never believe me —they'd believe whatever Young said, and

we'd end up getting shafted," Plecki wrote.

On March 24th, Kiamos interviewed the team members. Two students corroborated Plecki's account of cheating in 1994, but no one confessed to anything else. At that point, Kiamos was strongly suspicious, but because he had no evidence of cheating in 1995, he said, he simply requested Plecki's resignation as decathlon coach. The Board of Education went further and suspended him. "Plecki was very aloof and didn't appear to be real concerned," recalled Jerry Marconi, the senior assistant attorney for the Chicago Public Schools. "I had an administrator tell Plecki that unless he wanted to be dragged through the mud every day and go through a hearing, he should resign immediately."

Plecki did—and at press time his devoted team had not heard from him again.

Marconi was convinced that something had happened at DeVry, given the statistical anomalies in the 1995 Steinmetz victory and the 1994 scam. But he believed the students when they insisted they had no knowledge of cheating by Plecki or their teammates. "All of them had excuses," said Marconi, who at first suspected that Plecki had secretly slipped the answers in with the team's study materials. "One kid had an ear infection at regionals, and another had the flu. Some claimed they didn't study hard until they made it to states." On March 29th, Marconi issued a statement clearing the team of cheating at the Illinois decathlon meet. "We didn't have a confession," he recalled, "and we didn't have solid evidence of cheating."

At the time, Marconi didn't know about the "Confession" essay—Kiamos says he forgot to pass it on. But within a week, the *Tribune* had obtained a copy and contacted Patricia Lee Refo, a Jenner & Block lawyer working pro bono for the Decathlon Association. "I thought, Of all the things on planet Earth that this young man could write a fictional essay about, why would this topic strike him if there isn't some truth to it?" said Refo. "I also realized there was a piece to this that had never been told—that the author impersonated a judge at the state competition. Here was an allegation that I could either prove or disprove."

After several days of sleuthing, Refo confirmed that the young man who had written the essay had indeed posed as a judge in the speech contest. Other judges claimed to have seen a "very young man" wearing a judge's badge, and the Stein-

metz teacher who judged in the same room told Refo that he recognized the young man as a Steinmetz student. Plecki had put him up to it, the student now claims, telling the 16-year-old to say he was enrolled at the University of Illinois if anyone asked questions. As Refo and Isenberg prepared for a news conference to announce the finding, Marconi went back to work on the students, enlisting the help of Angela Lam. At nine in the evening on April tenth, he and Lam knocked on the door of team member Margaret Reszka. No one answered. "We saw movement in the windows," Marconi said. "We knew we had the right place." Finally, Marconi reached Reszka on his cellular phone, and for nearly two hours, he and Lam stood shivering on the sidewalk and pleaded with the weeping girl to let them inside. "Her mother yelled out the window, 'It's ten o'clock,' and I said, 'It's not my choice that it's ten o'clock at night. This story just broke, and I need to talk to you,'" Marconi said.

By 11:15, Marconi and Lam gave up and walked over to Pawlus's house. The lights were out, but Marconi dialed the number anyway. He got a busy signal and tried a few more team members to see whether the phone circle—so effective in helping the team maintain the month-long conspiracy—was still in operation. All the lines were busy.

Over the next few days, the students were once again summoned to the Steinmetz principal's office. "Was it rough?" Kiamos said. "Yes, it was rough. It was direct, and it was forceful. But was anybody threatened or coerced? No. I assured each student that I was the only person who could expel them, and I had no intention of doing so. No one was contacting colleges and asking them to deny the students admission. I gave them immunity and asked for their cooperation. The situation was tearing the school apart, the city apart, the system apart. We had to get to the bottom of it."

Marconi was certain the team would confess now that Plecki's judging scam had been uncovered. "When the kids knew we didn't know anything [else], they felt very comfortable lying through their teeth," Marconi said. "The more I knew, the more they told me. I watched them get caught in their own lies, so I figured everything would eventually spill out."

The first confession came from a team member, who admitted Plecki had circulated the stolen tests the week before the

state finals. Next, the essayist admitted passing the tests to Plecki and posing as a judge. Then the officials found the freshman who had stolen the tests from his father's office at DeVry, and the boy admitted what he had done.

But one by one, the other team members denied cheating and insisted they didn't know that Plecki or their teammates had access to the questions. Kiamos demanded that the team apologize, and after some hesitation, a student (reportedly Fitch) delivered a carefully crafted statement over the intercom. Instead of mentioning the word "cheating" or acknowledging any misconduct, the student merely apologized "for all the turmoil that has been caused. A cloud has been cast over the school that has caused distress to everyone involved. For this we are sorry." Kiamos also dispatched social workers—a so-called crisis intervention squad—to meet with the team.

Meanwhile, school authorities grappled with determining an appropriate punishment. According to the system's discipline code, the strongest punishment for cheating is an in-school suspension, so Kiamos decided the cheaters would be required to do community service, issue an apology, and write an essay on ethics. He also would demand the return of all medals—whether the student had confessed or not; seniors who did not comply could take part in graduation, but not receive a diploma.

Over the next few days, stress and Plecki's absence apparently ate away at the team members. One by one, they returned to Kiamos's office for what he calls a "counseling session and personal purging." Waiting for them were a guidance counselor, a social worker, and the Steinmetz official in charge of discipline. Kiamos promised that he would not mention the scandal on the students' transcripts, and he offered to "talk to admissions officers" if their applications were rejected by colleges because of the affair. Perhaps because they had stopped socializing together, the group began to splinter. Students who were once steadfast in their lies started to cry and apologize for going along with Plecki's plot. Eventually, six of the nine team members confessed to studying the stolen test.

"I saw remorse, guilt—a whole range of feelings," Kiamos recalled. "But again, the confessions were slow in coming. We'd get a sentence. Then silence. Then they'd go on. It wasn't easy. The confessions brought closure; they also left some unanswered questions. *Why? Why? Why?*"

Even though all the team members have returned their medals, three of them—Fitch, Krysiak, and O'Donnell—continue to maintain their innocence. They claim Kiamos and Marconi pressured the others into confessing (and, indeed, other team members have complained that the men bullied them). "I had no knowledge of cheating, and I didn't cheat," Fitch said. O'Donnell said he thought Plecki got a raw deal. "I don't think he should have lost his job over this," he said. "It was for an extracurricular activity. It had nothing to do with the school itself."

But one student who did confess made it clear the team family had dissolved. "I wish it had never happened," he said. "I feel guilty for cheating. I feel guilty for confessing. I feel guilty for *everything*. But I want everybody to believe the whole team cheated. And the people who deny cheating, well, they're going to have to live with it for the rest of their lives."

On April 23rd, Whitney Young took second place in the U.S. Academic Decathlon competition at the Palmer House Hilton. It was the team's best performance at nationals—and a fitting dénouement to the controversy. "The lesson here is, if you act as the good guy and do the right thing, good things will happen," said coach Larry Minkoff. (Minkoff has since retired as coach of the Whitney Young team, saying his departure had nothing to do with the events of the past year.)

Before the competition, Joan Isenberg asked Patricia Refo to lock the national exam in the Jenner & Block vault. "We must tighten our security," she admitted.

As far as is known, none of the Steinmetz team members has been denied admission to college. However, a Chicago philanthropic organization revoked the $1,000 scholarship for outstanding leadership and citizenship that it had awarded to one student prior to the scandal.

And what of Jerry Plecki? In June, he sent Kiamos an invoice for $1,716, representing the second half of his coaching stipend. His time sheet documents 150 hours—27 of them for the week of the state competition. But a check will not be in the mail. "We paid Jerry Plecki to teach the decathlon team how to win in an ethical manner, not how to cheat," Marconi said. "If we'd hired him to teach them how to cheat, we'd give him a bonus." ~