

## Start of Year Assembly Sept 2021

Welcome to you all. I hope that you had a wonderfully relaxing and refreshing break. To those who join us for the first time today, whether in the Thirds, the Fourths, or the Sixth Form, I offer the warmest welcome. I hope you will have a wonderful time in the years ahead, and I am sure you will bring fresh talent and enthusiasm to the school.

There is little doubt that last year ranks as one of our most challenging, but also one of our best ever. We took on the pandemic and found new ways to teach, learn and have fun. When we could finally get back to fixtures, we hit the heights in sport; despite the cancellation of public exams the GCSE and A-level results were superb and place us amongst the best schools in the country. This gives us a tremendous springboard from which to approach the year ahead. We will take the best of the new ways of working and add them to our tried and tested experiences. We should be proud of all that we have achieved, and be excited about what we will do next.

I thought we could begin the year with a true story that may offer something to think about, and perhaps will inspire. It concerns a man who is quite famous in his native Australia, but is less well known here. He is called Cliff Young.

Every year, Australia holds the world's most gruelling ultra-marathon. It is a 544 mile endurance race from Sydney to Melbourne. The race takes five days to complete and is normally only attempted by world-class athletes who train specially for the event. These athletes are super fit, typically less than 30 years old and backed by large companies such as Nike.

In 1983, a man named Cliff Young showed up at the start of this race. Cliff was 61 years old. Instead of sports kit and running shoes, he wore overalls and work boots. To everyone's shock, Cliff wasn't a spectator. He was there to run.

The press and other athletes questioned Cliff. They told him that he was crazy, that there's no way he could finish the race. Cliff told them that he could. He told them that he grew up on a farm where they couldn't afford horses or tractors, and he'd have to go out and round up the sheep himself. There were 2,000 sheep on 2,000 acres. Sometimes he would have to work with those sheep for two or three days, running non-stop.

When the race started, the professionals quickly left Cliff behind. The crowds and television audience were entertained because Cliff didn't even run properly; he shuffled along. Many feared for the old farmer's safety.

All of the professional athletes had the same approach to this gruelling race – they planned to run about 18 hours a day and sleep the remaining six hours. Cliff Young had a different plan. As I said, when the race started the elite athletes quickly left Cliff behind. However, when the morning of the second day came, there was a shock. Not only was Cliff still in the race, he had continued jogging all night. Cliff's tactics had caught them by surprise. To everyone's disbelief, he said he would run straight through to the finish without sleeping.

So Cliff kept running. By the final night, he had defeated all of the young, world-class athletes. He was the first to cross the finish line and he smashed the course record.

When Cliff was awarded the winning prize of \$10,000, he said he didn't know there was a prize and insisted that he did not enter for the money. He divided all of his winnings between the other runners, keeping none for himself.

Today, his distinctive running style - the 'Young-shuffle' - has been adopted by ultra-marathon runners because it is considered more energy-efficient. And nowadays during the Sydney to Melbourne race, modern competitors do not sleep. Now, winning the race requires runners to go all night as well as all day, just like Cliff Young.

I hope that there is a message for us all in this odd and heroic man's actions. A message that might carry you through the year ahead. The first message of the story is that if you have self-belief, do not be knocked off course by the disbelief of others. If you know in your heart something is right or possible – you stick to your guns. They laughed at Cliff Young when he turned up to race. They weren't laughing five days later.

Secondly, I hope we learn that we should not be afraid to think up new ways of doing something. Just because it has always been done that way doesn't mean you haven't a better idea. We learned that with Covid. Cliff could never have competed with the other athletes if he had chosen to sleep and rest as they did. But he had a different idea that no-one had ever tried before.

Thirdly, we should remember that talent is not enough. Every one of the athletes on the ultra-marathon start line were amazingly gifted sportsmen – elite performers. It did them no good, when faced with someone who had talent and *also* had a higher capacity for work. Every one of you is hugely gifted – you have the capacity to achieve at the very highest level – to be an elite performer. But you will need to add determination, ambition and hard work to your innate talent if you are to fully express your potential this year. You see, nothing defeats sheer dogged determination. How do you overcome someone that absolutely positively won't stop until he achieves his goal? How can you counter opposition that simply refuses to give up? Eventually, no matter how good the other athletes were, Cliff just ground them down. If you are determined and committed to success, you can too.

Cliff Young was certainly something of an oddball, but I hope we can all learn some important messages from him. And I hope we will be able to apply them in the year ahead. He also demonstrated one other talent – a talent that has become something of a Merchant Taylors' word, which sums up what I would wish for you: sprezzatura – understated brilliance.

Finally, I must share some sad news. Mr Tyler, the Head of Spenser House and an inspirational English teacher, has died. He passed away during the summer holidays, having suffered from an illness for a number of years. He will be sadly missed by members of Spenser House, those he had taught, his friends and colleagues and his wife and daughter. Let us bow our heads and offer a moment of silence in honour of a life that was cut short too soon, but very well lived.