



## **Sidetracked**

Deb Loughead

Reading level: 3.9

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### **Book Summary**

Maddy doesn't find it easy adjusting to grade nine. The friendships and loyalties she took for granted in middle school are being challenged, and there's so much more competition on her track team now.

When Maddy stumbles across a friend being bullied behind the school after a track practice, she suspects something nasty is going on. So when Coach announces one of the team members has been robbed, she realizes the two incidents must be connected. Everyone on the track-and-field team is under suspicion. How can the team function with so much uneasiness among its members? Maddy realizes the only way to bring the team together again is to make some changes.

### **Prereading Ideas**

- How do you deal with changing friendships as you grow older?
- Why is it sometimes so hard to do the thing we know to be right?
- What kind of family do you live in? Do you know and get along well with your siblings? Do the adults in your family trust you?

## Connecting to the Text

### Plot

- Teach students about plot elements. These include *exposition*, *rising action*, *conflicts*, *climax*, *falling action* and *resolution*. Working in pairs, have students map out the plot using these elements to guide their writing. Have each pair create a poster showing the plot elements of *Sidetracked*. (Follow the web link in Resources, below, to a Slideshare presentation on plot elements. As an added challenge, have students take notes as they go through the slide presentation.)
- Discuss with students the idea of a book's *premise*. The premise is a one-sentence summary of the main idea of the story. It's a statement of what happens to the characters as a result of the actions in the story. It's a bit different than plot, which is a listing of the events in the story. It takes a bit of practice to figure out the premise of a story. You might want to start by discussing the premise of some familiar stories, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Toy Story* or *Cinderella*. Divide students into pairs and see whether they can develop a clear statement of the premise of *Sidetracked*.
- The plot is how the story develops over time and as events unfold. A timeline is one way to lay out how the story evolves. Have students create a timeline for *Sidetracked*. If you like, spice things up a bit with this web interactive: [www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/timeline-30007.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/timeline-30007.html). Invite students to share their timelines with the class.

### Character

- Have students think of a different character they've met who shares similarities to Maddy. Instruct them in creating a Venn diagram where they compare and contrast these two characters, as well as the situations they face.
- Conflict is what keeps a story moving along. It's what makes things interesting! Typically, story plot follows one of four basic patterns of conflict:
  1. *Person against nature*. Tension comes from the character's battle against strong forces of nature.
  2. *Person against person*. Tension comes through the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist.
  3. *Person against society*. Tension comes from the main character's struggle against some societal factor that must be overcome.
  4. *Person against self*. Tension is created as the protagonist faces internal conflict; the hero has two or more courses of action and must decide which course to take.

Guide students in a discussion of the kind of conflict pattern in *Sidetracked*. Is there more than one?

**Theme**

The theme is the “big idea” or message in a book. Often, books can have more than one theme. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme(s) of *Sidetracked*. Have them go through the book and flag areas where these themes are apparent.

**Point of View**

- *Sidetracked* is told from Maddy’s point of view. Have students write a scene telling the story from another character’s perspective. For example, try writing from Zenia’s point of view when she’s being pushed around by Chase and his buddies, from Matt’s perspective when Maddy busts him for keeping his job a secret, or from Kat’s perspective when she thinks Maddy is deserting her for Shauna.
- Ask students to consider how the story would be different if it was told in the third person point of view. What are the advantages or disadvantages to using the first person? Third person?

**Literary Devices**

- A *simile* is a comparison using the words “like” or “as.” It’s a literary technique that gives the reader a compelling image to help broaden his or her understanding of the text. Here’s an example of a simile from when Maddy and her teammates get ready to run a race in chapter 1:

The muscles in my legs are *like an elastic band about to snap*.

Here’s another from chapter 4, when Maddy heads to Saturday morning track-and-field practice:

Some of the grade nine kids blend in easily with everyone. And then there are others, who circle each other *like nervous dogs sniffing out their rivals*.

And one more, from the beginning of chapter 6, where Kat and Maddy are wondering who will take the top spot:

But the question hangs over our heads *like a thought bubble in a comic strip*.

As students read *Sidetracked*, have them look for other similes. Instruct them to write three similes that specifically focus on competition.

- A *metaphor* is a way of writing about something by making it similar—or comparing it—to something else. For example, at the end of chapter 8, when Kat knows Zenia was a witness at the time the iPod was stolen, she says: “If only I could get Zenia to tell me. But her mouth is a tight line. She won’t be letting that information out any time soon.” Discuss how metaphors help us “see” a scene or an event more clearly. Challenge students to find other metaphors in *Sidetracked*.

**Vocabulary**

- After the introductory scene where the team runs a practice race, Maddy says her coach warned them the competition in high school would be fierce. *Fierce* is a powerful word with numerous connotations. Have students create a word map of this word. How many ways can they use it? What makes it such a powerful descriptor, especially when talking about competition? Invite them to sketch what they see when they hear the word *fierce*.
- Have students create a word search for track-and-field-related terms from *Sidetracked*.

**Connecting to the Curriculum****English**

- Read the first three pages of *Sidetracked*, where the team races during a practice. Notice how the author focused on the description surrounding the takeoff? Using a similarly descriptive style, have students write a paragraph about the experience of running the actual 100-meter race.
- Maddy, Scott and her mother live with their grandfather, which is an atypical extended family arrangement in North America. Have students write a paragraph about the advantages of living with members of their extended family, and a second paragraph about the possible downsides. Students can share these with the class, if they wish.
- Abuelo loves to cook. And Matt and Maddy love to eat! While Abuelo typically sticks to his Hispanic/Latino roots, he learns to incorporate American cuisine into his repertoire. Have students take a typical recipe that their family enjoys and think about how Abuelo might make it. Then, have them write their new “Latino fusion” recipe with a list of ingredients, and a logical, organized set of step-by-step instructions. Students already have a Latino background? Switch the assignment so they take a classical ethnic dish and give it a North American twist—or even one from a different cultural region altogether.
- In the final race, Maddy envisions her legs as a couple of pumping pistons. Have students create a list of specific sports-related movements (e.g. preparing for a dive; butterfly stroke; tennis swing; climbing maneuvers). For each movement, have them select a real-world action that describes or mirrors this movement.
- Have students create a one- or two-minute podcast about the book. Their end goal should be to persuade people to buy the book. Have students consider “inviting” characters from the book to the podcast, to add interest and a different perspective to the discussion.
- Invite students to design a quiz based on *Sidetracked*. As a class, talk about what makes a good multiple-choice (or short-answer) question. In pairs or individually, have students think of five questions based on the book. They can exchange their quizzes with a friend when finished.
- Have students write a letter or email to Maddy, as Kat. The letter is intended to clarify Kat’s intentions in “letting” Maddy win half the races—which means there will likely be an apology somewhere in there too. Discuss with students how they might approach this subject in their letters.

***Physical Education***

Maddy obviously enjoys running. Ask students to consider what their favorite track-and-field event is, and why. Which ones seem to be the most competitive? Why is this?

***Health/Personal Planning***

- Kat and Maddy have been best friends for years—and it's unsettling when their relationship begins to fray. Ask students to think about why friendship is so important to people. Have them write a paragraph about—or a letter to—a special friend, with a focus on why that person makes them feel good.
- Maddy witnesses Zenia being pushed around by several guys at the track. She knows the other girl is in trouble, yet she chooses to hide because she's scared that she'll also be bullied. Discuss with students: Why does our fear stop us from intervening when someone is being bullied? Have students role play this situation in two different ways. In the first, have Maddy be a bystander who does nothing. In the second, let students change Maddy's reaction to one of action and empowerment. Invite them to create their own role plays involving situations they have faced or might face in the future.
- Maddy isn't a huge fan of dances, but she reasons that it's better to join the group than “feel like a loser and stay home to hang out in cyberspace while their friends are here” (ch. 19). Talk with students about face-to-face time. How is it often better than connecting online?

***Mathematics***

Matt chooses to work at Burger King in order to be able to pay for the things he wants—things that his mother and grandfather can't afford to provide for him. This is a responsible choice that reflects how things work in the adult world. When Maddy goes to the dance, she's mad that she had to spend half of her weekly allowance on the door charge. This shows she is sensitive to how she spends her money—yet another excellent skill for being able to manage one's money in the adult world. If your school doesn't have a financial literacy program, take some time to explore basic budgeting concepts with students. This is information that our kids need in order to avoid making the same mistakes much of the Boomer generation and Gen X have made! Start at [www.themint.org/teachers](http://www.themint.org/teachers), where you'll find lesson plans, salary information, budgeting exercises, credit and investment information and a great deal more.

**Connecting to Students—Discussion Questions**

1. In chapter 1, Maddy reflects that there's nothing wrong with new friends—but still, some of her old friends are upset that people are shifting groups with the move to high school. Why does it sometimes hurt when our friends choose to hang out with other people?
2. In chapter 2, Kat and Maddy talk with their teammates about the new (stiff!) competition at their high school. Describe or write about a time when you similarly found yourself dropped to the bottom of the totem pole, so to speak.

3. Maddy really wants to get the top sprinter spot on the bantam team. But she can't really tell Kat that...can she? Why can't we be honest with each other sometimes about what we really want?
4. Things are competitive at the track in chapter 5—especially between Maddy, Kat and Shauna. How does rivalry help us? How does it hinder us?
5. Math comes easily enough to Maddy, but Kat isn't a huge fan. "Oh, who cares about the sides of a triangle?" she groans. "Why do I even need to know this?" (ch. 6). What things do you learn at school that seem completely irrelevant? As you see it, why do you think they're part of the curriculum?
6. Maddy reflects that running fills her with peace and is a great stress burner. What activity or pastime does the same for you? Explain.
7. When Maddy sees Zenia being bullied by the boys who stole the iPod, she doesn't do anything. And she regrets it. When we're too afraid to act and do the right thing, how does this affect us deep down inside?
8. When Maddy teams up with Shauna to help Shauna figure out what's going on with her brother, the two become unlikely friends. The tricky part for Maddy is integrating Shauna into her group of friends. When Shauna joins Kat, Maddy, Zenia and a few other girls at the lunch table, the conversation grinds to a halt. Everyone except for Maddy eventually leaves—and this makes Maddy frustrated. How do we grow when we open up and let others in?
9. In chapter 16, Maddy watches Carter fooling around at track-and-field practice. *If only something or someone could bring Carter down a few notches*, she thinks. Do you think people like Carter eventually get what's coming to them? Why or why not?
10. Matt and Maddy's mother doesn't interfere in her children's lives, partly because she's exhausted from working all the time and partly because she trusts them. Maddy says she has friends who call their parents "crowbars" because they're always prying into their kids' personal lives. Where do your parents lie along the continuum of trust? What do you think is a parent's responsibility—and right—when raising a teenager?
11. When Maddy finds out Kat has been letting her win half the races so that their friendship wouldn't be strained, she's disappointed because it feels like her friend has been lying to her. But Kat thought she was doing it out of kindness to Maddy. Have you ever compromised your integrity in order to preserve a friendship?

### Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I started running the moment I learned how to walk. It was always the fastest way to go places and explore stuff. Now and then it came in handy for chasing things, too, like squirrels and kittens, and those chickens when I visited the farm on Centre Island in Toronto. It was also a useful talent for playing games like tag and kick the can. Even nicky nicky nine doors.

It wasn't until I reached about grade six, though, that I realized exactly how fast I could run. Out in the schoolyard one day, our gym teacher lined us up and we ran races.

He told us the fastest ones could join the track team. (Things hadn't turned out very well for me when I auditioned for glee club, so I wasn't holding my breath.) But I won every race that day—could even beat most of the boys in my class. And that was a game changer for me. It meant I could belong to a team.

About the same time, I was having trouble with friendships at school. They seemed unstable and ever-evolving. Some girls were too loyal, while others changed best friends as frequently as they changed their knee socks. Far too much teasing went on, and too many head games. And somehow I always found myself caught up in the girlfriend dramas as we fought amongst ourselves and challenged loyalties. It wasn't easy. I cried a lot. I think we all did.

But on the track it was different. We had to let it go and respect each other. Someone had to be the fastest, and yes, it was me, and that was cool. The three other girls on my relay team were completely different types. There was the studious one, the quirky girl and the flirt. And me: a bookworm who always tried my best to fit in with everyone else, one way or another. What I loved most about a 100-meter race was that rush when the gun went off and I burst from the starting line and tore down the track. Even better was crossing the finish line as anchor of the relay team and handing out ribbons to my winning teammates. Sometimes we won or placed in our races; often we lost, but it was just being there that mattered most.

When I began writing *Sidetracked*, I kept these thoughts in mind. Somehow I had to create a novel that touched upon not only the competition involved in track and field, but also some of the other challenges faced by a girl Maddy's age who is surrounded by caring family and friends. I raised the stakes when I included a bullying incident that would create more conflict by shaking up the entire team. And I knew that by the end, the kids in my story had to sort out their issues and come to some new understandings.

Endings in novels don't always turn out perfect, though. And real life is like that too.

Deb Loughead

## Resources

### *Plot elements*

[www.slideshare.net/guest6bbfe8d/elements-of-plot](http://www.slideshare.net/guest6bbfe8d/elements-of-plot)

### *Career Choices*

[www.bls.gov/k12](http://www.bls.gov/k12)

[www.bls.gov/ooh](http://www.bls.gov/ooh)

[www.kids.gov/6\\_8/6\\_8\\_careers.shtml](http://www.kids.gov/6_8/6_8_careers.shtml)

### *Track and Field*

<http://trackandfield.about.com>

[www.athletics.ca/home.asp](http://www.athletics.ca/home.asp)

### *Money Management*

[www.threejars.com/home](http://www.threejars.com/home)

[www.themint.org](http://www.themint.org)

**Books***Fiction*

Brouwer, Sigmund. *Hurricane Power*  
 Butcher, Kristin. *Cheat*  
 Doty, M. *Surviving High School*  
 Kew, Trevor. *Breakaway*  
 Krossing, Karen. *The Yo-Yo Prophet*  
 Mac, Carrie. *The Beckoners*  
 Ross, Jeff. *Powerslide*  
 Vanderpool, Clare. *Moon Over Manifest*

*Nonfiction*

Gifford, Clive. *Track and Field (Olympic Sports)*  
 Jackson, Colin and Gwen Torrence. *The Young Track and Field Athlete*  
 Josephson, Judith Pinkerton. *Jesse Owens, Track and Field Legend*

**Author Biography**

**Deb Loughead** is the author of twenty-five books for children and young adults. She completed an English degree at the University of Toronto before working as a copy editor. She turned to creative writing after deciding to stay home to raise her three sons. Deb's books have been translated into seven languages, and her award-winning poetry and adult fiction have appeared in a variety of Canadian publications. In addition to having extensive experience with educational writing, Deb has conducted workshops and held readings at schools, festivals and conferences across the country. She has written and directed children's plays and taught creative writing classes for adults in Toronto. Deb likes to spend her non-writing time reading, knitting or hanging around horses as a therapeutic riding volunteer. Deb lives with her family in Toronto, Ontario.

**Author Website**

<http://debloughead.ca>