

COULD HAVE BEEN A CONTENDER

By DON SIKORSKI
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There are plenty of things people would do if given the opportunity to turn back the clock and relive the days of their youth, knowing now what we didn't realize then. Choose a different career path, study harder, move to a different place, eat a better diet, etc. For those fortunate enough to have had the privilege competing in high school or collegiate athletics, there are also a number of strategies many would have liked to rework upon reflection and the experiences that followed years later.

I will never forget the beating I took during my very first day of formal cross-country practice. The opening motivational speech from the recently retired Coach Sharples was followed by an easy, 3 mile trek from the St. Bernard High School campus to Fort Shantok. The group run over the hilly, challenging terrain of the 5K cross-country course within the park immediately followed. The pace, again relaxed and manageable, was fine but left me a 15 year-old boy wondering how we would be returning to St. Bernard with no vehicle transportation in site. The announcement that we would then conduct our team time trial over the very same course delivered mixed reactions from my fellow harriers. Two miles into that battle, I became well aware that I was asking my mind and body to perform aerobic feats never before encountered. The run returning to campus that followed was uglier, leaving me dehydrated, exhausted, and questioning my logic in choosing a fall high school sport. Coach Sharples dismissal speech that morning concluded with a request for the newcomers to get in "five easy" later that evening. 17 mile days; the man was either knowledgeable or crazy. But I bought into the system, slogged through five painful miles that evening, only to repeat the process of morning workouts and evening jogs throughout the week. Weeks later, I was hooked and able to tolerate the physical efforts with better results (chalk much of this up to youth because the body might not react the same way today). Running still hurt and hurt bad, but eventually my version of fast running became faster. And I had found a sport where hard work played the most significant role in future success.

That was many years ago, and at the risk of sounding senior, I now offer advice to younger runners competing in high school or collegiate cross-country:

PREPARATION – Summer mileage is the core of success for the high school and college cross-country runner. Adults competing in road races or marathon also recognize the value in building a strong base of aerobic mileage. Yet the dedication to get out and do the work during the summer months is a challenge. High school and college are times of distractions. Like most teenagers, I found many of them. But there is a sense of self-pride relating to the ability to get out the door for a run when you really don't feel like it. To quote former marathon great Juma Ikanga of Tanzania, "the will to win means nothing without the will to prepare."

RACE THE ENEMY; EMBRACE THE TEAM - While its human nature to compare yourself to your peers, true athletic competition can be found in challenging the competition. Too many high school and college runners are concerned with their team position and would be better served to work with these same teammates as training partners. The United States return to prominence in distance running can be attributed to the creation of group programs like the Hanson-Brooks Distance Project and ZAP Fitness, where elite runners train together in an effort to improve. There is tremendous pride in accomplishing something great as a team versus strictly as an individual.

TEST YOUR LIMITS; VALUE THE KNOWLEDGE – I was fortunate to be a part of a high school program that encompassed a precise season game plan, effort based training philosophy, recovery days, and focused on long-term development and peak performance at season's end. My college program was much different. Each workout was a competitive near-race effort, with a deep and talented team of runners hammering away at one another on a daily basis until the fortunate few were left standing. Looking back, I learned valuable lessons from those training mistakes. Often injured and over-trained, I gained an understanding of how much the body can tolerate before breaking down (a valuable yet painful lesson). I learned that there is no single training philosophy that works best for everyone (some runners thrived under these conditions while others ran below their potential). I also learned to appreciate the positive results that are derived from establishing a sensible, training plan that emphasizes long-term development.

GIVE 100% - There are many factors that determine success in distance running. I would score myself high in only one. To make up for a lack of talent, I approached every competition determined to be the mentally toughest runner on the starting line. The willingness to put yourself through more discomfort than others are able to tolerate can provide you with the incentive to succeed. Never walk away from the finish line feeling that someone had more guts. You will remember each effort for a lifetime and value each result earned through mental toughness. Remember the old cliché that pain is temporary while quitting last forever.

ENJOY THE RIDE - Finally, value the friendships and the camaraderie that sports carry with it. Some of the very best memories of our lives come from our youth and the friendships established amongst teammates. There are life lessons learned from athletic competition.

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