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AP Literature and Composition

29 October 2017

Stronger

“Why don’t you run cross country?” was a question I found myself answering about three times a week-- I guess having a boyfriend who runs is means for recruitment. I always answered with the same, lame excuse “I am not a runner!”. Thoughts would later creep into my mind-- what made cross country seem like such a terrible idea to me? Maybe it was a lack of experience, or maybe it was a stigma I chose to believe; whatever it was, it was stuck in my head that I could never be a cross country runner. That was freshman year.

1

Fast forward a few months and it’s the summer before my sophomore year. I had recently quit volleyball, and I was out of shape and looking for a way to change that. Lifting weights was my first choice, but at 15 I didn’t necessarily have the funds for a gym membership or a way to get to a gym. My boyfriend, Tommy, kept pleading with me to go to just one cross country practice, only to try it. It took a while but eventually-- “ok, fine” I caved. The night before the practice I was oddly nervous; I even messaged an old friend who was now a runner to see if I could stick with her at the practice. I showed up to Tommy’s the next morning scared, *I’m not a runner*, I wasn’t sure what I should expect. He reassured me with a reminder: this was just one practice; I was not making any commitments and there was no pressure to continue after this-- it was all in fun. It turned out that day was their hard practice for the week, but it went by fast. It was over; my one and only practice was done and I was free. There was one problem though-- I loved it.

2

I committed myself to the season, and I began to form new friendships. It was a small team so it was easy to get to know everyone, it was a feeling I had not felt on any team before-- we were all there for each other. *No one hates each other*, I thought, *this is nothing like volleyball*. I began to make a lot of progress physically during the season as well. I was dropping time quickly but the end of the season was quickly approaching. My coach was beginning to talk to me about work I could start doing to make the varsity team my junior year "You know, I'm sure you'll have a varsity spot next year if you work for it", but that all changed quickly. As the last few races were approaching, a knee injury popped up out of nowhere-- it was devastating. I was running up a hill at practice and all of a sudden my knee just gave out-- *oh no*. My times began to get slower, and I was crying every time I ran. It wasn't all physical though-- I was disappointed in myself after every race and I soon began to feel like an outcast on the team. I pushed through the end of the season and decided to take a few weeks off. By the time indoor track started, my knee was feeling better and my spirits began to lift again.

3

I made it through track season, but towards the end it grew painful. "Great, just in time for cross country season" my dad said. My knee began to hurt all over again and I decided to take a few weeks off. When I returned to running, things hadn't improved so I finally went to see a doctor; this was the first time my parents acknowledged there was a real issue. They sent me to a physical therapist who gave me multiple exercises and stretches to help with the pain, but it seemed as if there was no way to fix it permanently. *Great, I'll never be better*. I gave up on physical therapy-- but ultimately, I was giving up on myself. It was as if I had forced myself to come to terms with the fact that I would never be a runner and I was left to, once again, feel like an outcast or burden to the team. As you can guess, my junior year cross country season did

not go very well and that was when I made the decision to take a season of track off to really focus on healing. I cried when I had to tell my coach. I think, at the time, I really needed to heal physically and also emotionally; I needed time to focus on my confidence. While the time off was hard to get through, I think it really helped shape me as a runner and even a person.

4

It is now the end of my senior cross country season. During one summer practice, Tommy's personal trainer came to meet with the team, I felt a tinge of hope, *maybe he can help me*. I took a leap of faith, the next time I see him I asked if I could work with him, and that leap was the best thing I could have done. I began working with him weekly; I was getting stronger once again and my knee began to strengthen. "I think we can get you in the 21's" he said. I ran a great time at my first race, which really boosted my outlook on the season. I started to feel like a member of the team once again, and it really strengthened my relationships with my teammates. I became a captain, and started my time drop-- I was getting a personal record almost every week. Looking back on this last season, I am proud of how far I have come. It took a lot of hard work and dedication but it was all worth it in the end. I have improved so much, and I believe this will help carry me through this last senior year with a positive, hopeful outlook. Both my coach and I teared up at the last race. Because of cross country, I now realize how quickly everything is coming to an end, and how badly I need to be able to stop every now and then and just be in the moment.

I will always remember late night/early morning shenanigans with my closest friends, playing cards, catching crawdads in an ice cold river, and, of course, inductions-- all because of one, no commitment practice. Cross country helped me, not only highlight my personal accomplishments, but also build lasting friendships that I will cherish. I have learned so much about myself; I know my strengths, my weaknesses, and how hard I can push myself. In the

end, I have my boyfriend, my coach, and most importantly my teammates to thank for being there when I was down, and helping me back up. They saw my potential, not only as a runner, but as a person and in their own unique ways helped me become who I am today.