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Prompt #1: What has running taught you about yourself, your family, or your community?

Running: A demanding yet rewarding metaphor for life

Our sport is your sport's punishment. Short-distance, long-distance, for maintenance, or for a new personal best--running is tough whatever way you spin it. It requires a body that can withstand punishing physical demands, and an enduring mind that can tame boredom while sustaining consistent effort. This is what makes running such a valuable teacher. In my time as a runner, I've already learned a lot about myself and life as a whole. Thus, I can narrow down my experiences to three main lessons: embracing monotony, enjoying the process, and the unending power of self-belief.

In 2022, at the conclusion of my eighth-grade year, my dad tried to convince me to join the cross-country team. I told him, "Running is boring," and left it at that. Yet, after reluctantly attending a few summer conditioning practices, I realized that what I had mistaken for boredom was actually just consistency. To be a great distance runner, you have to be able to hold steady-state cardio training for often over an hour at a time. This makes training very focused on volume--accumulating mileage on the trails, in nature, and without distractions. Thus, as my running career has progressed since joining the Freedom team over the course of that one blistering summer, I've learned to accept this monotonous grind of running. This sport has taught me to appreciate being present in the moment while I run. Now, I can take in the scenery and can *embrace* the beauty of the Manassas Battlefields or the towering Oatlands hills. As a result, I am more conscious of what is going on around me and can have a better grasp on my own thoughts--both on the trails and in my daily life.

Additionally, by accepting the monotony of running, I also learned to enjoy the process of the sport. Every day during cross country or track season, I woke up with purpose. It was exhilarating--pushing limits while running for *fun*. In the process, I learned that the greatest success comes from loving what you do. My fastest times and best seasons all came from having fun while training and racing. However, this joy was not outcome-reliant. The trophies and medals are nice, but they were not what kept me chasing more. It was the intrinsic motivation of training and competition that kept me hooked. For instance, this past cross-country season, our team was dialed in and beyond excited to try to become state champions. We worked incredibly hard and had the talent to get the job done. We stepped on the start line, each of us smiling ear to ear. I could literally feel the *love* and support of my teammates pulsing through me. But ultimately, we all crossed the line a few spots short. We lost. It would be easy to look back and say “oh, we failed” or call it a “sad” ending, but I believe this is the wrong way to look at it. Instead, after reflecting, I’ve grown to understand that the season was already a success before we even stepped on the line. We put 100% of our effort into training and got to race alongside our best friends in the world. Anything else is just icing on the cake.

Moreover, running taught me to believe in myself. Running is a mental game--your mind constantly begs you to quit or ease up. Thus, the best runners are those who learn to harness their minds. If you don’t believe you can do something, like running a personal best, then you won’t. Early on, when I began to face the inevitable obstacles of running, I let them overcome me, reflecting on my inability to meet my goals. But as I grew to see myself as the greatest version of myself, almost delusionally, I learned that you can make *anything* happen. As Eliud Kipchoge, the first man to break the sub-2-hour marathon barrier and one of the greatest runners to ever live, said, “If you believe in something and put it in your mind and heart, it can be realized,” and

I believe that wholeheartedly. It may sound cliché, but I've seen it. This applies not just to running or racing, but to all aspects of life. If I lock myself into something, whether it be passing an exam or applying for a position, I know it will happen because running has taught me not to be complacent and to believe in myself.

Finally, running is the greatest teacher you can ask for. As a runner, you build a level of toughness, both of mind and body, that cannot be replicated. You learn to value the pursuit of dreams over actually achieving them. Furthermore, you are taught to always trust in the process and to never doubt your own abilities. Overall, running has prepared me to go out onto the many trails this world has to offer with a broader perspective and a more reinforced mindset for the goals and new personal bests ahead of me. Whatever phase of life I am in, I know I can lace up my Brooks and hit the dirt. Running has already taught me so much, and it will continue to do so--all the way to the finish line.