

I am the most important person on your team

[Patrick Bendzick](#)

Nov 8, 2013

The truly gifted appear to be created in a high-tech lab; born of the latest science and space age materials. Everything about them is precise, creating an efficient stride that appears to flow like water. The genetic lottery they were so fortunate to win makes even the most grueling workout look effortless. They cover mile after mile without as much as a bead of sweat forming on their brow, while the rest of us contemplate what is worse.....death or vomit.

I am not the truly gifted. In fact, I might be the complete opposite. My gangly frame and choppy stride are stark contrasts to the idealistic vision the sport places on a pedestal. I was not created in a lab; rather, I was forged on the road by the scorching summer sun and the hammer of endless asphalt. The genetic lottery ticket I hold is the product of two equally unathletic parents, and any perceived talent I may display is most certainly the product of hard work. But don't feel sorry for me, because I know that my team's success often rests in my hands.

I am the fifth man, and I toil in obscurity among the throngs of mid-pack runners that surround me each race. I will never make the front page of the newspaper, and I may never experience the rush of adrenaline that is the byproduct of a roaring crowd in the final 100 meters of a big race. In fact, by the time I usually finish, most of the crowd has already left the finish line area as they scatter to congratulate the marquee names that beat me each week. I spend most workouts in running purgatory; suspended somewhere between greatness and failure. Half the time I find myself closing in on my goals as I

chase down our top runners, the other half is spent fending off younger and more talented teammates who are eyeing my spot. I can empathize with these young athletes because I was once in their shoes. But their time is not now, because the role of the 5th man is too important to thrust upon a freshman who does not respect its importance.

Championship season is my time to shine, and the bigger the race the better. I understand that our team's 1-5 gap is my responsibility because accountability in the pack running philosophy happens from the back to the front. I also realize that if our top runner has a bad day we might lose a couple of points, but if I have a bad day we may be out 50-100 points depending on the size of the race. All of this is tremendous pressure to deal with, but it's a welcomed challenge and a burden I am willing to shoulder. I can handle it because I spend my races in the trenches and I am battle tested in every practice. So for all of you top runners, the next time you head out to practice be sure to thank your 5th man. Hold them accountable to the responsibility of their tremendously important job, and give them your unconditional support. Your trip to the state meet might just depend on it.