

## **The season is over. You won.**

**Jay Slagle**

A few years ago, my daughter called in a panic to report that her parked car had been hit while she was at a friend's house. The friend's mother had hit our car when she was backing out of her garage, not expecting a car to be blocking her path so late at night. The mother was apologetic, and quickly offered to pay for any body shop repairs.

We politely declined her offer. At the time, my daughter drove a 2001 Buick Century. It had a golf-ball sized hole in the floorboard near the gas pedal, hail damage from a decade earlier, and the speedometer and gas gauge hadn't worked in years. Before the accident, I could not have sold the car for more than \$500, and it was still worth \$500 after the accident. The Buick belonged in a junkyard, and \$2,000 of body work wasn't going to make it live one day longer.

Unfortunately, the Buick had been hit at the hinge of the driver's door. With significant force, I was able to open the door about twelve inches, but then the door wouldn't close. That's how I ended up talking to Jim.

Jim was the retired owner of a body shop he had handed down to his son. He was about 70 years old but looked no older than 60, the product of an active life and an active retirement. He still worked about 20 hours per week in the body shop and was covering the shop the Friday afternoon I met him because his son had taken his employees on a weekend hunting trip.

I explained my situation. I needed the door to open and close, for the gap between the door and the chassis to be eliminated, and for the mangled fender to stop rubbing the front tire. I didn't care how it looked after he was finished as long as he accomplished those three goals.

Jim assaulted the Buick with a crow bar and a large hammer, and then

pulled out a few dents with a slide hammer. In less than five minutes, the door swung with normal effort, but it wouldn't close because the back end of the door was higher than the front. He hung on the door and pulled it down three inches so it would close. However, the top of the door still had a two-inch gap to the frame. He sat in the driver's seat, put both feet in the middle of the door, and then pulled on the top of door to bend it inward. In less than ten minutes and for \$60 in cash, Jim had made the Buick was perfectly functional again.

That was my only experience with Jim, but I've met countless people like him. These are folks, young and old, who have learned or been taught skills that matter in the real world. Repairmen. Nurses. Veterans. Solving problems with common sense. Building up people. Repairing relationships. Persevering not only when life gets hard, but especially when the obstacles get higher.

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Distance runners are a demanding group, with most of the demands and expectations placed squarely on themselves. In the weeks after State, it's likely that most high school distance runners are dissatisfied. They didn't run their best in their last race. They didn't PR or make varsity, or qualify for State, or medal at State, or win a team trophy. Whatever goal they set last month or last year, they simply didn't meet the goal.

That, my friends, is the risk of setting high goals. You often won't reach them - or don't reach them as quickly as you expected.

Are you one of the disappointed distance runners? The failure? The underperformer?

Get over yourself.

You've already won, and you don't even know it.

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Let me start with a brief introduction. I've been a distance runner for 40 years, since I was an 80-pound 7th grader. I never qualified for State, and realistically was never close to doing so. With PRs of 4:53 and 10:46, I didn't consider running in college – but I also never stopped loving running. I organized a 5-mile road in my hometown during college, I still have my handwritten running logs from high school, and I've run nine marathons as an adult. Without a doubt, the most consistent things of my adult life have been my faith, family and love for running.

I was slow in high school. I'm even slower now. It doesn't matter. Running changed my life, just as it has likely changed yours.

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In 2018, over 5500 Nebraska boys and girls competed in high school cross country. Approximately 875 (16%) competed at State and just 120 (2%) earned individual medals. Two percent.

Few things are quite the equalizer like distance running. Rich or poor, outgoing or shy, novice or experienced – none of that matters once you join the distance squad. **Your status is measured in two key units: in seconds and how you support your teammates.** While the fastest member of a team earns the most medals, he or she is rarely the heart of the team. The heart of the team may be the runner who is the loudest or funniest, the hardest working, the most encouraging, or perhaps the most caring. Those are the people that make you want to be at practice, and people like that are often the reason that distance runners want to compete in college. At every stage of life, we seek communities where we can belong, and cross country teams offer that.

Cross country is more than a community, though. In large high schools, it's often the most diverse team in the school, a welcoming place for recent immigrants who are still learning English. Teammates range from special education students to ACT whizzes, because academic

achievement has no correlation to running talent. **There are two requirements to be a good teammate: work hard and support others. Coincidentally, there are also traits of good employees and good leaders.**

Beyond camaraderie, the greatest benefit of running is understanding how much potential you have. Perhaps a five-mile run seemed preposterous when you arrived for first practice, but by the end of the season you were ready for more. If you can improve that much in running, what could you achieve if you devoted your full efforts to math or English or art? Did running help you break down barriers in life that stopped you in the past? Once you consistently run 20 miles a week, even during the weeks you don't feel well, you'll soon realize that there is an alternative to quitting when you are challenged in life. Showing up for practice every day is so much harder than knocking out two hours of homework or giving your full effort at work.

Being a teenager is hard. When your parents were in high school, their social lives essentially stopped the moment they arrived home. Social media has destroyed that cocoon, leading to increased anxiety, depression, fear-of-missing-out and jealousy as teenagers constantly have access to the perfectly curated lives of friends, acquaintances and celebrities. Distance running is an antidote to that. Regular exercise reduces anxiety, depression and stress while improving sleep quality. Indeed, Psychology Today reports that regular exercise can be as effective as medicine for treating some forms of anxiety and depression – regardless of age.

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It's the end of the season.

You didn't win, qualify, PR, whatever.

But, like Jim at the body shop, you have acquired the tools needed to be successful in life. You created resilience for facing adversity. You

developed the discipline to tackle difficult tasks. You discovered that the more time and resources you invest in school/work/relationships, the more you get in return. You learned how to be part of a community. Your parents learned you're happier when you're running.

Hopefully you're at the beginning of a long love affair with running. It will always be there. Ready to make you feel fully alive.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

**You won.**