GENERAL PHILOSOPHY

Those who got it. There are several runners who I have known over the years who got it. As a freshman in high school Dan was awkward, ungainly, thin to the point that on windy days he was in danger of disappearing with some gusts. He ran just under 13:00 for 2 miles. The next two years saw slight improvements, but nothing major, cutting his mile time down to 5:20. Still he stayed out for the team, despite injuries, and kept his enthusiasm. After another thousand mile summer, something happened. By the middle of his senior year Dan ran 15:33 for 3 miles, and 9:44 for 2 miles. By the end of his freshman year in college he had run 15:19 for 5000m... Dennis, who ran 2-3 times a day, 100 miles per week, during the summer in college and went from an 18:30 5K runner to a 16:30 5K runner, who went from 32 minutes for 5 miles his freshman year in college to 27 minutes as a senior...Matt, who ran 18:30 in high school, but ran every day for a summer, 70-80 miles week, who followed the plan religiously, and improved to running under 28 minutes for 5 miles and would go through 5K in 16 minutes in those races...Tina, who had never run before but came out her sophomore year in college...she ran 27 minutes her first, kept on running, ran 24 minutes the next year...kept on running...and ran under 22 minutes her last year...and Jessica, who never broke 22 minutes in high school, but determined she was iron deficient, got her the proper medical care, and then she started running and by the time she graduated college was running under 18 minutes for 5K. And of course, Nick and Tyler at the 2007 state meet, making perhaps the biggest jumps of anyone in the meet to finish 8th and 5th respectively. All of those named above got it.

Do you? Will you?

What I try to do is coach the process, all the little things, the daily steps, that if done correctly will allow each student to progress and, if all the pieces come together, achieve their goals. I believe in a long-term approach that places an emphasis upon striving for a goal as the important thing. There are many things we cannot control, such as whether someone else has a good or bad day or the talents and limits that we are born with, that may affect whether or not we can achieve the ultimate goal we have set for ourselves. However, if we set goals for the process if we identify the steps and actions we need to take on a daily and short-term basis to achieve the ultimate long-term goal, we give ourselves an opportunity to succeed by achieving all of the things which we can control and influence. If we are willing to commit to the process, and an honest evaluation of how devoted we are to that process, then we can judge ourselves to be successful (or not so successful) regardless of the final outcome. In either case, we learn, and grow, and become better runners, and maybe even better people because of the experience.

Let's look at it this way. Have you ever dreamed of being an Olympian? Many of us at some point in our lives have watched the Olympics and dreamed of what it would be like to don the red, white, and blue and represent our country. While we may not want to start packing our bags for London just yet, let me suggest that, yes, you too can be an Olympian! You see, although we usually lose sight of it, the Olympic creed is “Citius, Altius, Fortius.” Translated, it means “Swifter, Higher, Stronger.” The catch here is that it does not necessarily mean swifter, faster, or stronger than others, but rather swifter, faster, in a process of building upon what you were before. Although we use the term competition when we talk about the Olympics, or cross country races, or track meets, or weightlifting, did you know the word "competition" is derived from the Latin word competere, which means "to seek together, to coincide, to agree." In this root meaning, there is no connotation of
"losing," no reference to “beating” another, or being “better” than another. In other words, true sport, physical activity and physical education, is not about striving to beat another for the sake of exerting dominance and superiority. Rather sport is for personal development, personal challenge, and personal improvement. These are areas in which we can all strive and engage ourselves and our families, friends, and fellow competitors, regardless of ability. We can “seek together,” a higher level of performance, fitness and health through sport.

In fact, if you find yourself anxious before races, understand that this is normal. It is the way the body and mind is preparing you to perform at your best. But also understand that competitors are merely others like yourself seeking personal development and personal improvement. View the others that you are competing with as a benefit in striving for improvement, not as a judgment on your performance. They can help you achieve your highest goals, which should be to be only the best that you can be.

At its core, the Olympic ideal values the role of regular physical activity as a part of your lifestyle. The goal should not be winning or losing, or beating or being better than another person, but being better than your previous self. Running and racing is not to be viewed as a means of punishment nor is it a way to assert physical superiority, but as a way to test your personal limits and talents. Unfortunately, we all too often see races and athletics in general as an end, instead of as a means, and we have been socialized and indoctrinated into that mindset through years of ignoring the Olympic creed.

I want to encourage you to enjoy being young, being healthy, absent of disease, of having greater energy levels, and a greater zeal for life. Enjoy your teammates and this time you have together. There are many in the world who give anything to enjoy the same opportunities you are being given. As the saying goes, ” ...once, when my feet were bare, and I had not the means of obtaining shoes, I came to the chief of Kufah in a state of much dejection, and saw there a man who had no feet. I returned thanks to God and acknowledged his mercies, and endured my want of shoes with patience...” (--- Sadi. The Gulistan). Be grateful for what you do have, do not waste the gifts you have been blessed with.

Picture a race. After the race, the “winners” are recognized as being the ones who came across the finish line first. How many people ran in the race, however? Hundreds? Thousands? At the start of the race, how many of those believe that they have the slightest chance of winning? Eight? Fifteen at the most? What on earth are all those other runners even doing there then? What do they gain by being part of such a hopeless venture?

The value for them is in the process, being a part of the event, as each individual challenges him- or herself to a high standard, gaining in confidence and ability through training and improvement. The speed and success of the winners IN NO WAY diminish the accomplishments of the other runners, or the value of what they gain by participating. Is it valid to recognize the success of the winners? Absolutely! They deserve our admiration and applause. Seldom does high achievement come without hard work and dedication coupled with talent. By valuing excellence, society as a whole benefits. At the same time, we must also applaud and value those that strove to achieve their goals, and did the most that they could with their innate talents. You should know by now that I do not measure true success in those terms – those are just the icing on the cake. True success lies in taking what you have been given genetically, and making the most out of that by applying yourself to the task at hand, in our case cross country.
In other words, if I could somehow take two runners into my lab and determine that one has the ability to run 16:00 for 5K, and the other 25:00 for 5K, and at the end of the season runner A had run 16:35 but runner B had run 25:01, I would consider runner B to be the more successful runner, despite the fact that he/she finished about 8.5 minutes behind runner A. We can't control who our parents are, where we got our genes, but we can control to a large degree what we do with what we have. This is important that we realize this. We are all born with gifts and limitations, and how we maximize those gifts and minimize the limitations, determines what we will accomplish in all facets of life.

I have been fortunate enough to cross the line first many times in my life, but I am at a point in my life where with each passing year I am farther and farther from the finish line when the winner crosses the line. You know what? Despite that, in the past couple of years I have had some of my most rewarding races because of what I had to overcome, and because of how I competed, and pushed myself to the limit, although in an absolute sense, I was far from winning. That is, winning with a small ‘w’. But, in my mind, I Won, won with big ‘W’, because I kept pushing through the ups and downs, the good and the bad, and found victory where we can all find it – within ourselves.

What Is Success?
by Ralph Waldo Emerson
To laugh often and much;
To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;
To earn the approbation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty;
To find the best in others;
To give of one’s self;
To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition;
To have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation;
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived -
This is to have succeeded.

OUR RESPECTIVE ROLES

Let me suggest something else that may sound different to you. You, as runners, do not run for me, I coach for you. As such, I am doing my best to help you explore your potential and achieve your goal(s) in this sport. To do this, we must be able to communicate openly and respectfully, trust each other, and be honest with each other. I will respect your efforts, and I would also ask that you respect my experience and my efforts in helping you. I cannot, should not, make you do something that you are not fully committed to doing. It is ultimately your decision as to how much you want to put into this sport and how much you want to get back out of it. I think we can have room for the fully committed, the not-quite fully committed, and the “I’m thinking about being committed” on the team. As time goes on, you may change from one group to another, and that is your decision. I am here to help you sort those things out, and discuss your ability and potential. The key to ANY successful relationship is this: TRUST, COMMUNICATION, HONESTY, AND RESPECT.

Using my experience, I can see things and suggest steps you can take to get better, but I cannot make a judgement on whether or not you are putting forth your best effort. Although I may have a
hunch, only you can know that for sure, and whether or not you can live with that knowledge is up to you.

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR
If you get what you want in your struggle for self,
And the world makes you king for a day,
Just go to a mirror and look at yourself
And see what THAT man has to say.
For it isn’t your father or mother or wife
Whose judgement upon you must pass,
The fellow whose verdict counts most in your life
Is the one staring back from the glass.

He’s the fellow to please, never mind all the rest
For he’s with you clear up to the end,
And you’ve passed your most dangerous difficult test
If the man in the glass is your friend.
You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years
And get pats on the back as you pass,
But your final reward will be heartache and tears
If you’ve cheated the man in the glass!

Please understand that you can talk to me, and tell me what is going on. If you are having troubles at home or at school, let me know. I would rather you admit to me when you are not following through, or have made a mistake, then to try and hide it from me. By hiding, we only mystify the process, and neither of us can learn. Mistakes are a normal part of living and learning, and I am certainly not immune from them. I have the benefit however, of having made many more mistakes than you, and having been around running for much longer, so I would like to think that can be of benefit to you in sharing my experience.

Further, although in sport many people speak often of winning and losing and beating or being beaten, I do not believe that is what sport is for, and very rarely will I ever talk in terms of winning or losing. Sport should be a safe vehicle for personal challenge, personal development, and non-critical and safe risk-taking. I will not be disappointed in you, only disappointed for you, when things do not go well for you on the course. Then it is time to evaluate, regroup, and then move on to the next race. Become a student of your sport, learn, grow, accept challenges and be open to changes in training, racing tactics, but keep sport in perspective. It does not determine who the better person is, it is a forum for testing yourself and challenging yourself, and you and your fellow competitors are there for the same reason - to help each other achieve your best performance. Keep in mind the Grand Paradox (thank you Will Shaw) - that sport is simultaneously of supreme importance and also of utter insignificance. Accept the paradox of pursuing what is at once essential and inconsequential.

In play you can totally commit yourself to a goal that minutes later is completely forgotten, and while important to you, does not ultimately determine your place in life. The journey is the key, not the destination, and we all take different paths to the objective.