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Professor Clauss

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Cross Country: More than Just Running

Situation: I am writing to Arthur, an eighth grader at my old junior high school, McQuaid, in Rochester, NY. I am a friend and a mentor to Arthur, and we share an interest in the sport of running. From recent online conversations, I understand that Arthur has been feeling somewhat alone and disconnected this year. Although he loves running and has considerable talent already as a junior higher, Arthur has entertained the idea of switching to a “team” sport once he gets to high school. Drawing from my own experience of McQuaid cross country, I hope to share with Arthur the advantages of joining the high school team which he may not realize from running individually in junior high. Ultimately, I want Arthur to stick with running in high school.

Dear Arthur,

Congratulations on your undefeated season and record-breaking times this year in cross country. You have certainly had an inspiring eighth grade year. It has been fun to see how your talents have developed over the past few years. The hard work that you put in over the summer and when no coach was looking is just starting to pay dividends. Well done.

I hope you are enjoying eighth grade. I gathered from our conversation a few weeks ago that you are feeling somewhat disconnected. As it relates to junior high running, it is easy to see why you feel that way. Up until now, running has been an individual sport for you. Your talents have placed you ahead of the main pack, and I know it has been rough running and training so much by yourself. Such intense solitary effort can start to wear you down and make you feel alone.

I know that you have started to consider switching sports once you get to high school. With your sheer level of athletic talent, I cannot blame you. It is quite possible that, with your

work ethic and determination, you would excel at any sport you might try down the road. The lessons you have learned from running could be quite useful if applied to any sport.

Certainly, I can see the appeal of “team” sports to you right now. In team-oriented sports like basketball, football, and lacrosse, victory can only be achieved by a team. Images of hoisting the Stanley Cup of hockey high alongside your teammates, or being carried off the field after a ninth inning Grand Slam in baseball, or thrusting your soccer jersey over your head and screaming “Gooooaaaalllll” at the World Cup, are all more glamorous than standing alone atop a medals podium, with teammates far away and in the stands.

In truth, not only at the moment of victory but every stop along the way, there is something uplifting about being a part of a team. A sense of belonging, of fellowship, of camaraderie is a vital to life in athletics. Running, especially before high school, can often live up to its classification as an individual sport. I commiserate with the burden you have felt from the sport’s individualistic nature this past year. Sports like baseball or soccer seem to play on greener grass as your run by yourself along the far side of the fence.

While your current discouragement is both natural and justified, I want to encourage you to continue running into high school. You are in fact on the verge, the brink, the very threshold of so much more. Your definition of cross country will soon expand to mean so much more than just running. Cross country will become for you a “team” sport.

Now, I want to caution before I start sharing from my own experiences that I am by no means hoping you will copy me. Far from it. Indeed, I am sharing my experience that you may be encouraged to look ahead, prepared for what is coming, and equipped to chart your own course. Since I met you while TA-ing your Algebra class last year, and since I found out you were a fellow avid runner, I have enjoyed getting to know you. You are in some ways similar to

me five years ago, but in others ways blessedly different. For one thing, you are already a better well-rounded athlete, and back then I was more of a dork.

We both have enjoyed our similarities. It was only a week after I told you my seventh grade PR that you beat it last year, by two seconds. Whereas I only lost one race my eighth grade year, you of course went undefeated. Take motivation from our similarities, as you already have, but never fall into the trap of comparisons. The choices you make, the work you put in, your unique gifting, talents, and abilities, set you apart. Living a life of comparisons can be fatal. As Coach VJ [the high school cross country coach] says, “Run your own race.”

With that said, I will share some of my experience in the transition between junior high and high school. Like you, I had a tendency to feel disconnected in junior high, and running half a minute faster than my teammates never helped. When I got to high school, though, things got better than I could imagine. Almost instantaneously my freshman year, cross country transformed for me from an individual hobby to a team sport.

Tim Plant, a senior leader on the team my freshman year, reached out to me even before the season started. Before I had even joined the team, Tim invited me to run with him in Cottonwood Park. Even though I was just a freshman, Tim took the time to get to know me and welcome me as a teammate. Once the season started, more friendships followed with Robbie, Wes, and Robert. With them and many others, I forged enduring and lasting bonds. For instance, at one early season meet, we showed up in SWAT gear bought from the dollar store. At a team retreat, we stayed up all night making posters. We then drove around the next morning “decorating” the yards of the members of the girls’ team. Through it all, we became brothers.

Therefore, do not worry about feeling alone next year. You will soon make an untold number of incredible friendships with a great group of guys who share your passion for running

and your work ethic. The team will include runners all very close to your ability, so you will not be running alone.

John Monville, a friend on the team who was a sophomore when I was a senior, will be the team captain next year. In spite of his occasional quirkiness, John is an amazing leader and friend, and he will welcome you to the team, as Tim did for me. Immediately upon joining the team, you will form dynamic friendships; five hundred miles down the road, you will look around you and find that these friends have become your brothers.

With these newfound brothers, you will have the opportunity to work towards team goals. My freshman year, the team and I set the goal of winning the State Championship. As our school had never won a men's team championship before, in any sport, our quest for a championship was truly historic. With each mile repeats workout in the 90 degree sun, and each hill reps session in the driving snow, we pulled each other on. Our shared goal brought out the best in each of us, pushing each of us to new and unimaginable heights.

On October 30, 2004, all our hard work and determination paid off. My brothers and I realized our goal, winning the State Championship to lay the capstone upon an epic season. No individual achievement has ever begun to compare to the thrill of accomplishing victory as a team. The thrill of reaching goals, such as your undefeated season, is intensified when the goal is for the good of the team.

Arthur, I also know that as a strong Christian your faith is important to you. One thing you will love about the high school cross country team is the shared sense of community which arises from shared faith and values. Your teammates next year, like you, are strong, committed Christians, and they will push you to a deeper level of faith. As it was my freshman year, every practice will be started with a voluntary prayer. This may be a simple tradition, but it is powerful

because it allows you to focus on God before every practice. Through friendships with teammates, you will grow spiritually all throughout your time on the high school cross country team.

Beyond the formalized tradition of beginning practices with prayer, faith on the team will take form in a variety of other spontaneous ways. A beautiful memory from my freshman year was singing old Sunday school songs in a tunnel under the interstate one cold day during a lightning storm. The inclement weather, which by all accounts should have trashed the spirits of the team, instead lifted us up by allowing us to build each other up in faith. If you join the team next year, you too will get to be a part of such team unity established through faith.

Finally, as a Titan cross country runner next year, you will be immersed in a constructive environment of encouragement. It took me by surprise my freshman year to see how often positive affirmation is used on the team. Each time I ran by a teammate headed in the opposite direction, that teammate would give me a “high five” or a quick word of encouragement. Such a culture of support alone would often reenergize me and keep me going. Words and gestures of encouragement fueled a fire in me that took me to a new level of competition.

When you add up the friendships, the team goals, the faith development, and the constant encouragement, you will find high school cross country to be so much more than just running. The sport becomes a way of life, resting firmly on the support of your brothers and friends. High school cross country is more fun than you can imagine right now, as it taps freely into the well of team solidarity which until now has evaded you as a runner. Cross country may be on paper an individual sport, but at McQuaid it becomes so much more. After even a week of running with the team next year, you will start to understand what I am saying. Your definition of cross country will extend beyond just running. The holistic awesomeness of the sport will hit you, and

you will no longer feel disconnected. Once you reach high school, you will find that cross country is both an individual and a team sport. It effectively draws from the best of both worlds. It will exceed your expectations. I strongly encourage you, Arthur, to stick with running. Please let me know how I can help!

Your friend,

Travis