

Finish Line

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*I based this off a fantastic finish yesterday at the cross country meet...I didn't place very high (hey, I never do), but it was probably the best finish I ever have had. Period.
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You know the drill: Read and critique.

1. Finish Line

The brain is on autopilot.

Not responding to the mind, not caring. The mind simply wants to end it; wants to end this exquisite torture. While the mind screams at you that it's tired, that it wants to stop, the brain keeps pushing.

Don't stop.

Ultimately, it is the body that truly suffers in this battle between mind and brain. In protest to the different commands piping down communication lines, it (uselessly) tries to tell the guys upstairs what really is going on.

I need to stop.

But you keep running, keep shoving yourself forward. After the first mile, you still think that you should race ahead of the girl in front of you, but after that second mile it just becomes a question of survival. You'll deal with her later; right now it's a matter not losing the pace, not slowing down.

The mind is quiet now, and the complaints from the body have all but been muted to a dull roar. In your ear the brain gently coaches you along, telling you to watch your step on that rock, to pull you knees up on the upcoming hill, and then on the downslope following it, to fly.

Before you know it, that girl is far behind you. The mind has broken its momentary muteness to come in and gloat, but the brain quickly silences it.

You watch for her. She'll be back.

You know that that has to be the truth. Carefully tailing her the first mile, you evaluated for weaknesses and strengths. You had noticed that, while she eventually began to leave heavily on her right side, her breathing was calm, controlled.

Like you, she's waiting. She's saving herself for that last, painful mile.

Yes. She'll come back. The only thing to do now is to make sure that you don't slow down like she did earlier, allowing you to move ahead.

Clapping, cheering. People you don't know (and do) cheer you on. They insist that you're almost to the end.

Why, then, does it feel so long?

The ears abruptly become alert. They sense noise and someone moving behind you. Noise-specifically breathing-has been absent behind you for such a time that not its arrival snaps you

to attention. You don't need to pivot your head to know that she's back. Instinctively it's just acknowledged.

The single track splits in front of you to two paths. You move to the right to allow to her pass. The mind objects to this, but the brain ignores it and instead tells you what's going to happen.

Just stay on her heels.

So you do. As she shifts and moves up in front of you, you (slowly) pick up the pace. A glance to the left tells you that there's only half a mile remaining. It's time to go faster-but not too much. You cling to her heels as the route flattens out and then, there it is.

The finish line.

It's time.

The coach-the real one, not the brain-is suddenly at the sidelines, telling you to pick up your knees.

Ah. The motion of elevating the knees. It is a barely subtle signal to move-now.

You start to pick up speed before she does, lifting the knees and pumping those arms. She's surprised by the move-but acts a nanosecond too late. You've already pulled ahead and are nearly gasping for air, lungs screaming for release. But the only thing you see is that finish line-so tantalizingly close.

She realizes what this is. A showdown. And suddenly that figure that you watched, that you made careful attention to, is gaining.

No! She can't have this place. It is yours. It might now be first, but it's all you have. And what you have is pride.

The feet are flying, the arms a blur of motion. Your uniform is flapping in the wind, rising up, but you're oblivious. The only thing that matters now is winning.

Faster now. Fast than you thought you could ever go. She's clawing her way beside you, fighting for that position-the place that this far back has no meaning but now is everything. A low growl is coming from your throat, a noise that somewhat makes itself heard of the gasping for air and the cheering from the sidelines. This is your place. Not hers.

The brain is screaming-no gentle words now-that you have to beat her. Have to. The finish line is there, less than two hundred feet away. Energy-adrenaline-is draining fast, but with what's left, you push forward with all you have.

There! Your foot has crossed the finish line. You had to have finished before her...right?

It's not known, currently. You're too busy staggering towards an aid as she gently ushers you to the side, telling you to breathe.

Weak smile.

Breathing isn't an issue right now.

You rip off the identification sticker and without thinking start handing it to the aid. She pauses for a moment to take it, as obviously there is a change.

"Give 52nd to her-she won."

The stick is now taken, and you feel yourself reaching for the place stick subconsciously.

Then it hits you.

You won.

The body is shuddering, inner gears overheated and screeching against each other. Unsteadily you turn to her, that girl that almost beat you, and smile.

"Good job."