

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way." - Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities, 1859

If I could describe our club season so far, I would have to use this quote. It is a knee-jerk reaction to how this summer has gone. I did want to spend a little bit of time reflecting on some of my thoughts on this summer, our group, and (hopefully) with some encouragement to all of our athletes.

For our club, it has been a very interesting year. We have had great success (hosting the world's largest mall vault, setting a national record, winning 6 gold medals at the state meet, breaking a state record, hundreds of PRs, numerous school records, etc.) and we have also had great struggle (I am sure every athlete can fill in the blank for this one).

Success is always nice, and NEVER comes easy (there is always a good story behind someone's success). As I sit (still drenched from the rain that cancelled the boys pole vault in today's meet) and reflect at where we are headed, there is simply one word that comes to mind. That word is "**dedication**".

A lot of my older athletes always roll their eyes when I start on my, "everyone wants to be great" speech. But since I can't see you roll your eyes when you read this (nor do I care) I will say it anyways..... I have found that every single athlete that I have not only worked with, but also just talked with, will tell you that they want to be great. They want to be the best, and they will do whatever it takes, blah blah blah blah. I always hear it, as no athlete would openly admit that they just want to be "OK". So everyone is saying the same thing. Everyone wants to be great. Obviously, NOT everyone is great, so the difference in the great ones and the "wannabees" is the level of dedication. Yes, one could argue that talent trumps dedication, but I would then have to argue back with you. And I don't want to argue. (Great book to read before you try to argue with me is called "Talent is Overrated", by Geoffery Colvin) I have seen it so many times that the athlete who shows up, does the work, and KEEPS showing up, NO MATTER what happened at the last meet is the one who will become great.

The dedicated ones are the ones who have great stories. The ones who keep working at it, even-though they get frustrated at times at their lack of progress. We have had so many athletes in just 3 short years who have improved so much just because they trusted in the process, trusted in their coaches, and did not give up. We had athletes who were on the verge of quitting the sport, decided to give it one more chance with a new coach, and then did great things. The current STATE RECORD holder in the high jump was hours away from hanging up her spikes before deciding to give us a chance to see if she could improve. And she didn't improve for months.....But she trusted the process and improved by over 3 1/2 inches in less than a year. One of the only girls in Florida state history to win back to back triple jump titles at the state meet was going to quit the sport before we tried to help her out. One of the best male pole vaulters in state history got 3 feet worse over the course of the summer with our training, but because he believed in the process (I was trying to help him not die while pole vaulting) and stayed dedicated to what he was doing, became one of only 7 men in state history to jump over 5 meters (16'4"). I could go on with examples (if you need more, just email me and I would be happy to brag on our athletes) but what all of these have in common is that with good coaching, and a determined attitude, great things are possible. But they usually don't happen overnight. They take work, they take failure, they take hours and hours of repetition, and they take dedication to finally see the improvements. And they will come, to those who are dedicated.

It is such a simple concept, but people get better at things that they repeatedly do. You can tie your shoes now because you practiced a lot (and failed) when you were younger. Now you are good at it. Or you wear Velcro.....

You are probably wondering now why I started this musing with a weird quote. Well, let me tell you. As this summer season has gone on, I have done a lot of thinking about the performances this summer, the competitions we go to, and what our athletes (and their parents) are thinking. We have had some great meets, and we have had some horrible meets. The majority of our competitions this summer have started way too early in the morning, allowed limited coaching, and were not run (track pun!) very well at all. We have had athletes cheated out of performances. We have had rain delays, cancellations, headwinds to fight, long lines to wait in while baking in the sun before running, and we have had injuries. We have had a tough summer. This is not a complaint, nor an excuse. But we have been “in the worst of times” more so that we would like.

As a coach it hurts my heart to have athletes who are ready to go and perform well, not be able to do so because of poorly run meets, bad luck (weather), and “rolling schedules” which make me want to roll my eyeballs right out of my head whenever I see that on paper. This means things will change next summer, but that is for another reverie.

What I am trying to express is this: If you want to be great, no matter what, be dedicated to what you do. If you want to be a great pole vaulter, dedicate yourself to being the best. That means looking at the big picture, picking yourself up after failure, working hard, listening to your coaches, and making sacrifices to being the best. If you want to be the best (remember, everyone says they want to be) you have to show up day in and day out, no matter what happened at the last meet, and dedicate yourself to being the best. Great progress is usually slow progress. Great example? One of our guy vaulters this year. He spent over a year between 11’ and 12’9”. He loved the pole vault, and just kept working at it. It took him a year (eerily to the day) to go from 12’9” to 13’6”. That’s a long time..... Soon after he went 14’. Then 14’6”. Then 15’. He improved from 13’6” to 15’ in less than 3 months. He finally started to reap what he had sown. It took a while. But he didn’t give up. He was dedicated.

Again, I could go on and on, but will try and end this with a quote from my favorite movie of all time, “The Pistol: The Birth of a Legend”. It tells the story of Pete Maravich’s 8th grade year as a basketball player. I would highly recommend it to everyone. His dad is a college basketball coach, and says this to a group of his players, and I absolutely love it:

“Now if you’ll forget about the girls and cars and listen to me you can accomplish things that you never thought were possible. I don’t care if you’re short, slow, tall, or small. You can play with the best of them if you’ll dedicate yourself to becoming better.”

It is simple, but it is so true. Great things are possible, if you are dedicated enough to make them happen. Don’t let a bad meet or a bad month get you down. If you want to be great, you need to stay the course and keep showing up and keep working hard.

I am so thankful that we have had such a tremendous group of seniors who have provided a great example to our younger athletes this year. I still can’t fathom how much they have accomplished this year. My brain hurts just thinking about it. They did it because they were dedicated, and because they just wouldn’t give up. They just kept on fighting.

We will continue to have great times, and we will continue to have bad times. That is life. The ones who are the most successful are the ones who just keep on moving, who look at the big picture, and who are dedicated to what they really want to achieve.