

FROM FEARFUL FRESHMAN TO TEAM LEADER

By Lindsay M., High School Junior

It was late one August afternoon and the beginning of a new chapter. Butterflies rioted in my stomach. My hands were fidgeting on my lap. Mom was calmly driving the car, as I sat there, head filled with anxious thoughts. Here I was putting myself out there, ready in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, water bottle in hand. As mom maneuvered the car into the parking lot, I noticed a group of girls trickling over to a huddle under a big oak tree. Meanwhile, boys outfitted in running shoes, tank tops, and shorts congregated under the canopy of another oak, purposefully separating themselves from the girls, of course!

Mom wished me a good practice, as I hopped out of the car. She drove down the parking lot and turned left onto the main road. I shyly made my way to the tree, which would soon become our meeting spot. Still unsure of where I belonged, I accepted the small smiles I received with relief. As I looked at the other girls' faces, I observed their quiet manner - some were clearly as anxious as I was. The upperclassmen made sure to make newcomers feel welcome with friendly small talk. The coach sat on the grass, surveying the girls, as they moseyed their way over.

She introduced herself as Katie Pratt, but we were told to call her Coach Pratt out of respect. We then did some icebreakers to get to know each other better. I soon realized that this would be a place where I could express myself freely; their warm smiles were proof that we all had a shared understanding of the challenges of being a teenager. I felt the anxiety slip away, burrowing into the far corner of my mind.

Once we'd settled in, the seniors led the girls into warm-ups. I followed behind, thinking how I must have looked to the other team members. They all seemed confident and ready to conquer the course, while I grew self-conscious. I was prepared to not be in the same shape as they were. I had never been a runner and wasn't conditioned. We ended up by a balance board made with a large wooden plank on a curved base, which they uniquely called the whale watch. Our goal was to make it balance, and we had almost hit that target..until the boys' team came marching over, breathing heavily from their warm-up. They goofed around, as the girls rolled their eyes. Clearly, the boys hadn't gotten the memo that in order to balance, you have to stay still.

After conquering the whale, we began our trek toward the student parking lot where we would finish warming up. The coaches were conversing, and I assumed they were plotting our dramatic demise. As a few senior girls led us in a series of stretches, I shyly tuned in on the conversation about summer vacations and the upcoming school year. Once we'd gone through the stretches, Coach Pratt and Coach Krampitz summoned us over to tell us the plan for practice.

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There was one thought rummaging in my head, *what if I get lost or am unable to finish the run?* I hadn't even run a mile and these girls had run multiple. This worried me because I didn't want to seem weak or like I wasn't trying, so I kept one foot going in front of the other, struggling to find my pace. *There we go, Lindsay. Just like that.* The other girls pull out ahead of me, some of them offering words of encouragement. Being the runt was never thrilling, so I continued to pick up pace, but then I stopped. My legs were burning from exercise and my breathing was labored. This is not what I expected when I had signed up, although the parental unit had forewarned me.

Eventually, after what felt like an eternity of hills and dales, the school came into view. Once everyone was back at the tree, Coach Pratt brought us down to the track. She explained we would be doing two striders and two accelerations. My head internally cocked, *And what exactly might those be?* It turned out, these were weapons of torture for fatigued athletes. After my first strider, I was already winded and panting; after the second, my shins were on fire. The accelerations were not much easier, but I did the best I could. After I finished the set, I bent over with my hands on my knees, attempting to get air into my lungs.

A couple of weeks later, the first team 'pasta party' was held at one of the team member's houses. This pre-meet gathering of the boys' and girls' teams was meant to be a time where we all were able to be teenagers hanging out without coaches. When I arrived at the house, I felt instantly at home. My shyness disappeared in the upbeat atmosphere filled with friendly smiles. There was an energy buzzing over the first meet of the season, which was the next day. Determined to overcome my anxiety and relate to the other runners, I approached the table of small snacks filled with cheese and crackers, chips, sliced vegetables, and more. Once the array of pastas was served, I was having comfortable conversations about our first meet, homecoming, and more! It was then I found out what this team was *really* all about. I came to enjoy being a part of this family of friends and teammates, each unique, but with one common trait: we were *C-R-A-Z-Y* enough to compete in 5Ks!

Now, three years later, I am an experienced member of the cross-country team. Together, we have grown as a family in the seasons we've shared. We even have a team chant: *...we like to run hills, we like to run races at really fast paces, that's our XC rap, now go run a lap. And if you didn't smile, then go run a mile.* Each year I improve my times during meets, and, surprisingly enough, I haven't had to run to a nearby trash can in three seasons. Last fall, during my junior year, I received the Sportsmanship award because I'm a friendly competitor. While the girls have teased me about this, we all know kindness can help runners' outlooks on themselves as athletes. This year, *I* became the upperclassman giving welcoming smiles to any runner, teammate, or rival, who needed them.