

# Let's Face It

By: Ryan Gallagher

While standing near the finish line at a cross country meet this weekend, I had an epiphany of sorts. I know how to prove to those unbelievers enamored with the physical nature on the hard court or the sheer brutality on the gridiron that cross country is the most difficult sport. And I even have irrefutable, convincing proof. How do I know that cross country is the toughest sport? The same way that you know: I raced. But I don't have to sway you, the cross country runner. So how do I persuade those who did not race that this is the toughest sport? We all know that answer, really: I don't. Perhaps my only recourse is to tell them, in the words of *Once A Runner's* Quenton Cassidy, "You can not disavow that which you never possessed." I'm not sure why I even care to convince them. I guess it's just the nature of the long distance runner – I like the challenge of a seemingly impossible task. An impossible task until now, that is.

I understand that these folks don't believe it's the most fun sport or the most fan-friendly. I get that, as it offers none of what makes sports like football and basketball so enticing – short blasts of entertainment where the results of a play unfold relatively quickly so as to appease the masses who crave immediate gratification. Why do you think soccer is so unpopular among the viewing audience? It's the same reason NBC shows us heats of the 100 meter dash and neglects the 5k final. But, I digress. A cross country race is different, as are its runners. It unfolds in a strategic, sometimes deliberate manner in which the consequence of a strategic surge, draft, or elbow may not manifest itself in the results directly. Or even more damaging to the popularity of the sport, it may go unseen altogether, delivered with the subtlety of a slight fall breeze or hidden from sight over a hill or behind a cluster of trees. And I have no response to the inexperienced observer's complaint that "not much happens" when a pack of runners zip past in a blur and nothing appears to change from the moment they appeared, barreling across the grass. In a way, I can't blame those who do not know for their skepticism.

But as I stood near the finish chute last Saturday I thought, "This is what people need to see to understand what happens out here." Stand at the finish line and just observe the runners as they cross the finish line. That's it; that's the only part of the race worth watching for the casual observer unsure of what exactly takes place at a cross country meet. Watch as they grasp for their knees, clutch at their singlet, crumple helplessly to the dirt. Forget the nuances of the surge over hills, the 'hard pass' around turns. At the finish line, only watch as they cry. Just look at their faces. That tells you everything. Their countenance tells you how badly that just hurt. One runner in particular approached the finish line, arms pumping and legs churning. So bent at the waist was this runner that I was certain he would fall flat on his face. His head shook so violently from left to right that I thought his bulging eyes may shoot from their sockets. A glob of spittle clung to his face and hung from his chin. It was as if even saliva were attempting to escape the clutches of the convulsing lunatic lunging at the finish. And this was the winner. That look of agony and exhaustion looks the same on the face of the winner as it does on the face of the loser. Name another sport where that occurs...every time.

Sure, I've seen basketball and football players – both the winner and loser – cry following a contest. But they cry as a reaction to the outcome, the result. With regularity, the basketball player does not fall to the ground in exhaustion following a hard charge leading to a lay up just as the football player doesn't crawl on hands and knees following a scurry downfield to defend a long pass, his only recourse given the nature of his effort. As a matter of course, the volleyball player does not writhe in pain just after executing the kill.

But that is what happens in cross country. True, a runner approaches the starting line with the same basic intentions as the quarterback. Every athlete, every competitor shares in the desire to win, to improve from the last competition. But the cross country runner toes the line with the fresh memory of 'last time' and the harsh realization that what he or she is about to undertake will hurt – win or lose. Each athlete approaches competition with the realization that, in order to experience success, he or she must overcome obstacles and perform well. The realization that in order to experience success, you will undergo intense discomfort from start to finish is reserved solely for the long-distance runner.

Heck, in other sports an athlete can claim victory without giving his or her best effort, depending on the quality of the opponent. Of course a runner can win a race without racing to a personal best or giving his best effort. But that runner knows about it immediately after crossing the finish line. The truly competitive racer knows whether or not he or she claimed a personal best time or effort.

Here's a variation on a theme: "Cross Country – The Agony of...competition." I've ditched the 'our sport is your sport's punishment' argument. I've even ditched the argument about how 'our sport is the first real sport. It's primitive, pure, simple.' Instead, for the inexperienced observer whose interest is untested, skeptical, or fleeting, I've adopted a new argument – 'Cross Country: Just look at my face.' Sounds like t-shirt material.