

NIKE
1st NATIONAL HS CROSS COUNTRY TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS, December, 2004

Imagine...that you know nothing about cross country. Then imagine that a friend takes you to a cross country race. What do you see? A few dozen, hard-bodied athletes racing over a course of grass and dirt, hills and flats, then finishing one behind another in a long, exhausted line.

"There," you say. "That boy is the winner." Or that girl. "Let's go home."

"Wait," your friend says. "We have to see who won the team race."

"Team race?" you ask. "You mean this is a team sport?"

You are confused, because the competition is clearly over, yet apparently you still have to wait for a computer to tell you who won the team title. What kind of sport is this, where the game is over and we still don't know who won?

That's a reasonable question. To innocent eyes, cross country doesn't look like a team sport. Yet in the sense that every team member has an equal affect on the outcome, cross country is probably the most complete team sport of any you can name. In baseball, a good pitcher can carry a team. In basketball, a seven-foot center. In football, a star quarterback might make all the difference. But no one athlete can ever carry a cross country team, no matter how good he or she might be. In cross country you win or lose on the strengths of five runner, and sometimes as many as seven.

Your best three runners position you to win, your fourth and fifth runners actually finalize the win, and if they can't quite, then your sixth and seventh runners are there to break ties or displace other teams' scorers....Or not. Good cross country teams have five strong runners. Great cross country teams have seven. And really great cross country teams have more than that--eighth, ninth and tenth runners who can fill in for teammates sidelined by illness or injury, and step up next season to carry on your tradition.

TONIGHT,

Today, we are in the presence of some really great cross country teams, the best high school cross country teams in the nation, and we at NIKE are both honored and awed to have you here. This is the first such national high school team championship, an historic event, and we are proud to be a part of it.

Great teams don't just happen. They are a product of leadership, commitment to goals, hard work, enthusiasm, mutual respect...even love. What counts most in creating a successful team is not how compatible its runners are, but how they deal with their incompatibility. One year, on one of my high school teams, we had a sophomore girl, Stephanie, who always wore the same black t-shirts, jacket, and jeans, screened with politically provocative slogans. The rest of the team didn't know what to make of her. Their relationships with her were friendly, but cautious, and conversations were often awkward and brief. The next year, Stephanie attended school abroad, returning in her senior year and rejoining the team. Stephanie was the same quirky individual she had always been, as

far as I could tell, but the team response to her was completely different. Whereas two years before the team had merely accepted her, now they embraced her. One day on a run with a few of our veterans, I asked them what had happened: "Has Stephanie changed. or have you?" Their answer was instantaneous: "Oh, we have. Now we think she's totally cool."

A team had finally grown up. That team would, in that same season, win the 4-state New England Championships* by such a margin that had their first two runners dropped out, they still would have won. Stephanie was our third scorer that day.

Great cross country teams represent an understanding that whatever our personal differences, as runners we all share common ground. Everyone's first day of running is just as difficult as everyone else's. Everyone's first long run just as challenging. Everyone's first race is both a thrill and a paralyzing fear. Every improvement, every goal achieved, is reached in the same way. Injuries are ghosts which haunt us equally. As runners, we all share the same experiences. As teammates, we are equal. As a team, that equality of experience makes us a family. Great teams are also a product of great coaching...and in that regard, all of you have had good luck.

BUT Most of all, great cross country teams are invariably about great kids, the kind of kids that strengthen a team just by being the kind of people they are.

*MASSACHUSETTS DOES NOT COMPETE IN THE NEW ENGLAND XC CHAMPIONSHIPS; VT, NH, RJ, ME ONLY

Well, so what? Great teams have great coaches and great kids. So far, I haven't told you anything you don't already know. Okay....Try this. Maybe this will be a new idea for you: Life is a team sport. I hope you've been taking notes this fall, because much of what you achieve in life, much of your future happiness, may depend on how well you take this team experience you have just enjoyed and transpose it onto your future.

Bill Bowerman said, "You have a far better chance in life of winning as part of a team than as an individual." For more than twenty years, Mr. Bowerman was the track coach at the University of Oregon, where he coached 16 undergraduate, sub-4 minute milers, in the days before artificial tracks, in the days before rabbit races, in the days before NIKE. ~~That record has yet to be broken.~~ Mr. Bowerman was also the co-founder of NIKE. Listen to it again: "You have a far better chance in life of winning as part of a team than as an individual." The truth of that statement should be immediately obvious to everyone in this room. Tomorrow is the Super Bowl of high school cross country, and none of you would be here if it weren't for your team. Neither would I, for that matter.

My team was NIKE. I used to work here, a junior varsity talent at best, pulled along by my more able teammates, caught up in the excitement and achievement, lifted by expectations, supported by trust, aided by communication and cooperation. My teammates depended on me, and I on them.

For awhile at NIKE, I worked from 7 in the morning till 3 in the afternoon in a factory on the East Coast. At 3:30, I coached the local high school cross country team. To my surprise, I found that I needed no change of mindset, no shifting of gears, from one job to the other. I realized that I had been managing my NIKE job in the same way that I coached our cross country team, expecting people to be selfless and responsible, expecting commitment, expecting everyone to be both a leader and a follower as the situation demanded, celebrating every improvement, every victory. Expecting everyone to take pride in our performance. Expecting everyone to have fun.

Whether I was coaching a cross country team or managing part of NIKE's business, it was apparent that the fastest way to reach our goals was to involve everyone, to bring everyone with us. In that respect, the two jobs were exactly the same.

Great teams don't just happen....Life is a team sport....These are ideas you can consider more closely later. You have a race to run tomorrow, and right now that race is foremost in your thoughts. But please take just a moment to reflect on how you got here. You've had a long journey from your first team meeting to your first team practice, to your first meet, to your conference championship, to your state championship...and now you are here. How did you get here? When did you come together as a team? How did you come together? How did your coaches guide you? How did your teammates motivate you? Who were your leaders? How did they inspire you? **How did this happen?** And what have you learned?

In time, I think you will conclude that your real accomplishment will not be your result tomorrow, nor will it be your results this season. Instead, your real accomplishment will lie in having become the team you've become. Of course, it's something of a cliché to say that the accomplishment lies within the journey rather than the destination...but clichés usually become clichés because they are true.

In East Africa, they know a little something about cross country running, and a little bit about teams. Teams from Ethiopia and Kenya have dominated the World Cross Country Championships for more than a decade. The Ethiopians have a saying: "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion." The Kenyans also have a saying: "Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable." What these sayings represent is the understanding that however strong an individual runner may be, when that runner enlists teammates in a common quest for excellence, his strength increases by a magnitude.

More than a century ago, Rudyard Kipling called this factor of team energy the "law of the jungle," and wrote about it this way: (I can't believe that I'm about to read a poem to you, but I am.)

"Now this is the law of the jungle--
As old and as true as the sky;
And the wolf that shall keep it may prosper,
But the wolf that shall break it must die.
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk,
The law runneth forward and back--

For the strength of the pack is the wolf,
And the strength of the wolf is the pack."¹

Wow! You can't get away from this stuff. This truth is repeated in ethnic sayings, and in poetry. Now it lives in your own experience. A team has strength beyond the sum of its individuals. A lone wolf can't bring down a bull moose; no single person built NIKE; and no one among you will be able to claim sole credit tomorrow for your team's performance. If you want superior results, work together.

But you already know that. You are all here today, every one of you, because your achievements as a team have earned you that right. Where you go from here is up to you, but I urge you to take this team experience with you. Remember...Life is a team sport. It really is. And you've just been given a big head start.

I want to wish you all good luck tomorrow. That's what people always tell you before a race--"good luck"--but you don't need luck. Luck isn't much of a factor in cross country. What you need is preparation, and you have that. What you need, too, is focus, so you can run to your fitness and ability, while executing your team's race plan. Be prepared; you already are. Run your best; I know you will. BELIEVE IN YOURSELVES; I KNOW YOU DO.

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Kipling, Rodyard. The Second Jungle Book (1895) "The Law of the Jungle."

Jack Daniels, the cross country coach at Cortland State, in New York, says if you do only that, you'll achieve three major goals in the race:

First, you'll defeat all the teams who aren't as good as you;
Second, you'll defeat all the teams who are no better than you;
Third, you'll defeat all the teams who are better than you,
but who run stupid races.

Of course, there is a fourth hypothetical: the team that is better than you and runs a smart race. And if that team is here, they're going to beat you. But that's okay. That's what cross country is. Life, too. ^{ALL YOU CAN DO IS} Be ready. Do your best. ^{HAVE CONFIDENCE.} Work your team plan to the best of your ability. Rely on your teammates; and make sure they can rely on you. ^{DO ONLY THAT AND YOU'LL NEVER HAVE TO COUNT ON LUCK.} ~~Characteristics of a winner. Though some people will probably always call that luck.~~

One final thought--I promise, this is it. Since we've already established that you're all great kids, why don't you turn around tomorrow in the finish chute and introduce yourself to the athlete behind you. Make a friend. Friendships made on the field of sport are the real prizes of competition. They can make this amazing weekend last forever.

Thank you.