

***** SECOND PLACE *****

Think Small

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He crested the hill, fully fifteen minutes behind the top male finisher. The crowd roared to life, cheering and clapping as hard as for the first place racer. Scenes like these dominate cross country running. Runners set a high standard of sportsmanship. We never lose sight of our unspoken code of conduct or our long-standing tradition of excellence on and off the course. Racers, fans, and coaches populate every bend and straightaway, line the finish, and huddle together in the pouring rain to whistle and applaud every finisher, friends and competitors alike. Unfortunately, in today's highly competitive sports arenas, the emphasis on sportsmanship is often lost in the struggle to master form and achieve unachievable physical perfection. Simply shaking hands after the siren blares is not enough.

I remember during my first race, a rival tripped on a root and lost his glasses. I picked them up and handed them to him. My coach found out – I thought he would scold me for my costly stop – and praised my simple act of integrity. Sportsmanship begins at the smallest level, in the hearts, minds, and actions of the individual. It gains momentum with every heartfelt “good game” and high-five. People learn best through example, and as a three sport captain this responsibility falls on my shoulders. I am proud to be a link in the chain. I run all my teammates to the finish, encouraging them with a mix of compliments and challenges. Every race or practice, we support everyone from the best to the newest, male to female, Pittsfield to Taunton. Negativity in any form is taboo. Fostering a positive atmosphere and a sense of pride in accomplishment remain my top priority.

At its most fundamental level, sportsmanship is the love of the sport, of competing though not necessarily winning. It is respect; respect for yourself, respect for others, respect for the game itself. Athletics demand not only physical and mental excellence, but a fusion of the greatest virtues. A delicate balance of pride and humility, or aggressiveness and support, competition and ethics. Regardless of my overall rank I am content, reacting to times with a smile and the knowledge I ran a personal best. I hope to impress this upon everyone I race. Victory isn't measured only in points, but also the athlete's level of comfort in giving every ounce for the team. My teammates are beginning to realize this. Collectively, we've eliminated the MVP award in recognition of every member's invaluable support and individual talents and contributions. Several local high school teams are contemplating doing the same. Sportsmanship is infectious.

Without support, sportsmanship is amorphous, an ideal without substance. Our example will inspire others and slowly spread from county to county, then state to state, and inevitably, nation to nation. We are content to wait. I may not be Kobe Bryant, David Beckham or Mark McGwire, but my words and actions can and have made as much of an impact. Sportsmanship starts small then grows. Think small.