

When Crossing the Finish Line Means More than Winning

There's a kid with a slight stature on my Cross Country team. Seventy-five pounds and the size of a Polly Pocket. He runs with a wild stagger, unlike Usain Bolt.

He's the last to warm up, to workout, to cool down, or to finish the race, trailing far behind even the girls with injured hips and broken arms.

See, this pint-sized boy has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, and Microcephaly, making his head small and his demeanor hyper.

But he doesn't care.

Speeding on the torrid rubber track, he rounds corners with his miniature feet, pulling his legs up and slapping his electric blue shoes to the ground.

Gripping dark pavement, he claws his way through hills and rough edges, suffering scrapes and burns but loving every second of it.

Sprinting on chalk red trails, he metamorphosizes into a dirt devil, sending pieces of sanded gravel yards away into the dips and basins, speeding with each rock and twisted tree root he meets.

His name is Kei, and each trail we tread on together motivates me to run swifter and with a better mindset.

Unlike the triumph-seeking runners, race after race, Kei eagerly approaches the start because he loves this sport, despite knowing there's no ribbon for him.

He dreams to be as robust as the Hulk and as agile as Spiderman. He strives every day with a broad grin bigger than his scaled-down head and ecstatic cheering for the rest of the team.

Kei has something bigger than any other Cross Country member. His heart is full of admiration, pride, and confidence, and this senior tadpole wants people to know it.

The sheer ferocity and tenacity in his little body beats that of any varsity runner.

His iron lungs carry him through his toughest runs. They also carry his excitement for life. As he runs one finds him chatting about werewolves on YouTube, his nineteen girlfriends, and fighting a King Cobra in the middle of dust bowl in Colorado Springs.

During his first workout with the team, his eyes widened with such thrill and sheer bliss that even after his skinny legs felt weary, he wanted to push further and keep sprinting alongside the long-legged boys.

Cheering boldly and boisterously, without fail he high-fives the runners at the end of their race. And when it's all said and done, he begs to do it again.

When I watch Kei run, I realize that I take for granted the trivial junctures we turn into mountains. While we create obstacles, Kei overcomes them.

Running to become something exceptional, to achieve crazed dreams, is what I aspire to feel. Kei may never be an all-star runner or win the Boston marathon, but he runs for his and his team's aspirations, even as they scoff at his light frame. If Kei can do it, so can I.

He drives me to my highest potential, to knock down every limit, and strengthen my teammates, just as he's done for me. I'm more excited now to advance in Cross Country with Kei by my side, to become more nimble and tough, and to do it together as a crew.