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Motivation and Confidence: More than Cheerleading

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(Positive Reinforcement is) ***More than Cheerleading***

Epigraph

*There is a comfort in the strength of love;
 'Twill make a thing endurable,
 which else would overset the brain,
 or break the heart.*

William Wordsworth

I remember the day well. Augustana is hosting its 3rd NCAA National Cross Country Championship: November 18, 1989; zero degrees; whistling winds at nearly 30-miles an hour. The wind-chill is a numbing twenty-six below! There are about 40 officials attending to last minute details, and all are wearing parkas. The grass is gray-white after the night's frost; the American flag at the starting line is snapping straight out from the pole. You'd think it was metal.

Two 2½-mile loops defined with flags and a painted alley lay out the course. Soon 300 runners will charge off that starting line, afire for an all-out effort over the hills and turns of Rock Island's Highland Springs Golf Course and against the best distance runners in the country.

The best of these young men are anticipating a first mile in about 4:40, a pace that would win a lot of high school one-mile races. But the race shapes up even faster as the leader turns a 4:38 and then picks up the pace to a blistering 4:32. It's 9:10 at the two-mile and already the athlete leading is over 50 meters ahead.

**What makes possible that kind of aggressiveness?
 What empowers that kind of courage? Where does he get
 that confidence?**

Here's the story of that frigid day. That lead runner is Augustana's Dave Terronez, currently the head track and cross country coach for the Bettendorf Bulldogs. He is not the favorite even though he is the defending national

champion. There is, as a racer might say, “a target on his back.” If he’d win today, he would be only the second person in NCAA history to repeat. The pressure is palpable, and maybe greater this year over other years because three **regional** champions ran faster winning times in their respective regional qualifying meets last week than Terronez did in his. They all are there today in the starting box next to this defending champ.

Since we were hosting, I was out at the course long before the teams arrived, but soon athletes from California to Maine, from Seattle to Atlanta are gathering in a giant rented dressing tent warmed by several propane heaters. They all are adding stocking hats, gloves, and long underwear under their uniforms. Some wrap face-protecting towels over their mouth and nose.

Only later did I hear about our team discussion . . .

Our men asked Terronez,

“What are you going to wear?”

“This,” he replied, pointing only to his nylon singlet and shorts.

They were dumbfounded: “You’ll freeze to death.”

“I don’t plan on being out there that long,” was his reply.

He defended his title that day with a school and course record-----and that title is, I would assert, a consequence of more than smart, hard training, good nutrition, physical talent, and a positive attitude. That kind of confidence reflects---**and is born out of**----how that athlete sees the world and how he sees himself in this world. The title of “Champion” is a manifestation of how he processes all his life experiences----consciously and unconsciously.

A national-champion-level of success is rare (there is, after all, only one out of literally thousands of collegiate runners), but whatever success one’s abilities allow, dealing with personal uncertainties, unplanned experiences, and all the absurdities of human life are a part of **every** athlete’s

being. How does one handle a breakup with that girlfriend of two-years? How does he fully recover from a bout with the flu? Is that knee going to hold up? Others might ask, how to deal with the med. school rejection. Or Dad has stage 4 cancer and right now I'm supposed to run as fast as possible for five miles in crazy cold?

Those guys do not run in a vacuum! Besides the inevitable personal challenges they face, all of those athletes also have daily challenges in college. They wrestle with organic chemistry, Shakespeare, Accounting 301, French vocabulary, law school applications, accounting internships. They have to cope with the "C" when "As" and "Bs" are the norm for him. The list is long and it is complex.

And more. They sometimes end up with a neat-freak roommate who drives them nuts when he dusts his shelves daily and alphabetically files his assignments. Or they might end up living with a friend who has never, ever, made his bed and whose side of the room looks like a pizza-crust storage bin. All these athletes must balance workouts, classes, bed-times, and nutrition; they deal with injuries and sickness; and, perhaps most importantly, they **all** ask the big existential questions of life, trying to calculate the importance of their sport in the mix of everything else in life that matters.

In the first year of my college coaching career (I was only 23), I quickly learned that the occasional long bus ride toward a warmer-weather track meet was an unexpectedly important, even critical, part of the whole college journey. On the bus were long games of Pinochle, rotating teams of Euchre, and the occasional challenge with chess. Here friendships were deepened, and bus rides passed quickly.

But not every spring trip was fun. Nor is every leg of the entire athletic journey joy. One trip for sure. I will never forget the news we received one morning while checking out of our hotel: Martin Luther King had been assassinated. Sprinters and throwers, jumpers and hurdlers, black and

white---had an abrupt awakening **to process**. Suddenly Randy Middleton's high hurdle race that day didn't seem very important. Randy is black. Other black kids were stunned. White teammates felt that too, and all of us, coach included, were speechless. For a while the only sound was the hum of the tires on the highway.

But gradually whispers pierced the silence---and not about the track meet:

"I was afraid this was coming."

"Was the assassin white?"

"What now?"

Two of our black teammates were crying unashamedly. A few seniors asked if we should compete today? A lot of us lost our innocence that day. Whether we were ready to tackle it or not, we were awakened to national issues of racial justice and to the **personal consequences** of these events beyond our control---events that stirred empathy we didn't know we had.

Last spring I received a letter from John Jacobs, class of 1972 and conference champion in the javelin. He wrote:

I think of those years in college (the rigors of labs and papers, yes, but also the issues of Viet Nam, Civil Rights, Student rights, sit-ins, protests, earth ecology). Track for me, [he said], provided a way to breathe, to focus, and to do something which had a tangible outcome. We became engaged in the world . . . and track brought some sanity to an otherwise wobbly environment."

And there was Viet Nam: one runner----a sure place-winner in his event----skipped the conference meet, which we were hosting, to march in protest of the war. I am sorry to this day that I disciplined him, because later I "got it." What was 5-6 points in a track meet while some of your friends are learning to throw a grenade, shoot an M-16? Where does a conference track meet fit in my life when I think about my low

draft number? One Monday our senior captain, after a weekend of seeing too much up-close NBC coverage of the war literally could not workout on Monday, and I told him to just go home until he could. When I came into the stadium after practice, he was sitting---inside on the bottom of his locker(!)--crying. Just “going home” was not going to be any help at all!

That era also saw the murder of Bill Sampson, a recent Augustana grad who had gone on to Harvard Divinity School and then medical school in Virginia and had become active in civil rights. His senior year at Augustana he had been student-body president. We knew him. He was white, and while marching in protest against racial injustice, he was shot in the heart by a Ku Klux Klansman (1979 Greensboro, Massacre, Greensboro, North Carolina). Peter, Paul, and Mary, the most famous folk-singing group at that time asked us, “How many roads must a man walk down before they call him a man”? That was just one of the poignant existential questions those young men asked.

Every generation, every athlete has a different story. That generation had to survive the draft, watch fire hoses and rubber bullets attack fellow citizens. They had to process seeing the Ohio River catch fire, forcing an ecological consciousness beyond just “don’t litter.” Again I say, these guys do not compete in a vacuum.

We often hear that athletes learn from sport: they learn patience, commitment, work-ethic, fairness (you don’t cheat), discipline . . . you know the list, and it’s true; but, participating in a sport is not just about learning quality character traits. The iconic miler and physician Roger Bannister, the first to break the 4:00 barrier, tells us:

Sport is . . . no better or worse than we are ourselves . . . [it] shows us something about ourselves, about our society, and about our world that is---in the main---well

worth the striving for, well worth preserving, and well worth perfecting.

So, in an environment so complex and poignant, how on that freezing November morning did a 22-year-old athlete achieve what he did? What meaning could he see in a five-mile race---What meaning did he perceive in an endeavor that promised only:

exhaustion to the point of staggering legs,
a hammering heart beat,
numb-cold hands,
and the taste of blood in his mouth?

In any athlete's personal and complex life, what meaning **is** there in a 23-minute race? Physician and Doctor of Psychotherapy, Thomas Herington of the Kaiser Foundation says, "Confidence depends upon how the athlete sees his **place in the world** and, more importantly, how he sees his **place inside himself**." This dual self-knowledge, Herington says, creates confidence.

Let me be concrete. Another story. Socrates Catavatis was a freshman at Augustana in 1980. He grew up in Greece where he competed only in the triple jump in track. But it was evident early in the season that he was an exceptional athlete: he was already the 5th best 100 meter dash-man among an All-American core of sprinters; he was 5'8" tall but could grab the rim above a basketball net; his success in the triple jump confirmed uncommon strength and balance; he could throw a softball 60 yards. I encouraged him to begin to learn the 10 events comprising the 2-day competition in the "DECATHLON." There's a lot to learn---with three different throws---each requiring different kinesthetic skills (javelin, shot put, discus), 110 meter high hurdles, the 400 (often called the most painful and demanding sprint), the all-out-explosive 100 meter sprint, the long jump, high jump, and the metric mile (1500 meters). Only the long jump was a familiar event for him. And to top

off all this is the most challenging of all, the pole vault. Here, after running full speed for 30 yards with a 15-foot fiberglass pole in his hands, he has to hold tight and jam the end of that pole into a sunken box, jump off one leg and power his feet and legs so he is completely up-side-down, before he simultaneously bends his waist at 90-degrees and twists his whole body 180 degrees into this convoluted gymnastic position to get over the crossbar without knocking it down. Besides the requirements of speed, strength, and complicated gymnastic skill, he must have a whole new spatial reference. He has to have a gyroscope in his brain.

After he felt confident that he was at least safe if not skilled (he wouldn't kill himself), he would practice with the guys who ONLY vaulted. For context, Augustana has had 11 All American pole-vaulters in the 16-foot range. Their repeated practice jumps would be at 14-15 feet. Soc (as we called him) worked to clear a bar set at 9 feet. One jump in particular went awry: half way through the jump, the pole slipped out of his hands; he banged into one standard; nose-dived to the floor, while the cross bar and both standards crashed on top of him. He was not hurt. But he was embarrassed. Those other guys were jumping 14-15 feet, and he **couldn't get off the floor** without crash landing! He just sat on the floor red-faced, staring down at the collapsed standards, not wanting to look at anyone.

I ran over to him, smiling, and sang out, "Wow, Soc, you had to be a hell of an athlete to live through that." His teammates clapped, patted him on the back, and put the standards back in place. No one suggested a "correction." No one said, "Next time do such and such." There was just concern, demonstrative affection, and personal affirmation. He reframed the entire experience, and later they all headed off to supper together. Confidence was enhanced, not diminished.

That young man finished his college career as a three-time All American (placing 3rd in the national meet three years in a row) and consistently vaulted 14 feet to accompany his 6'4" high jump, his 50 second quarter-mile, and his 15-second hurdles.

He surely saw his place in the world as fit and healthy and successful at what he does. But how does he see his place inside himself---(or, if you will) how does he see his *existential self*? He is more than skilled, fast, and strong. He is more than determined and competitive. He has fears and doubt while he works toward a college degree with English as his second language; he wonders about his future, knowing he has military obligations when he returns to Greece; he has complex relationships, some thousands of miles away; he wants to be loved. A lot of all this revolves around his teammates and coaches.

Four years later, this now 4-time conference champion and already two-time All American finds himself in 9th place after the first day at the national meet. But he knows who he is: first-day points are not his whole self. Day two is different. He jogs, smiling, to the starting blocks, eager to start the first race of the day, and he runs his fastest-ever hurdles. He then throws the discus and javelin further than he ever had, runs the 1500 as if it were his best event, and vaults 14'6" to end up third over all---and once again an All-American. A coach from another college put his hand on my shoulder and whispered, "If I am ever in a war, I want that kid on my side." That coach understood there was something more in this young man than just athletic skills.

Socrates went from not-placing to All-American. And it wasn't just cheerleading that enabled him to do this. Every athlete needs more than a cheerleader when he has to face what looks like inevitable failure—even if he is Tom Brady or Michael Jordan! For this 5-foot 8-inch collegian, achieving All-American status that once seemed impossible is, well,

transformative. Of course he is confident: past success verifies. On the other hand, failure means no verification, no affirmation. But . . . the athlete who is affirmed **as a person**---who is loved, who is more than a place winner, a record holder, a champion---that athlete has the “freedom to fail.” He can be aggressive; he can be reckless because this competition is not who he IS; it is something he does. He sees his place in the world and he sees his place inside himself. He knows his true self, not the self that is defined by outside forces, by measureable achievement like records or national ranking. It’s “confidence,” yes, but it’s deeper. His existential self is altered. He is not afraid to “fail” in this event. That long ago shaky vault when Soc’s teammates cheered and his coach reminded him that he was a superb athlete, he “reframed” the episode, and embarrassment turned into affirmation.

Real “positive reinforcement,” then, is more than just cheerleading. Hearing cheers and “way-to-go” from others is affirming, but deep-seated self-confidence is required to achieve success, success at any level---whether running for a national championship or just a personal best. Just surface praise is not always effective in the long run, and in fact can be detrimental. Verbal praise--or cheerleading--as positive reinforcement sometimes is bad,” suggests Michael Perone of the Psychology Department at West Virginia University. He argues that “negative reinforcement” **followed by corrective instruction** will prevent “bad outcomes.” To concretize this, then---in the case of Soc, our decathlon vaulter---something like “don’t rush your trail leg,” or “don’t bend at the elbow” could prevent the “bad outcome,” in this case, the vaulter’s crash landing.

Reinforcement is more complicated however. The *International Symposium on the Art & Science of Coaching* reports an experiment with young runners that contradicts Perone’s view of reinforcement.

Here is the format:

Three groups of young boys were asked to *run 100 yards* as fast as possible once each day over a few weeks time.

******One group* was told “*you’re doing well, but . . .*” This feedback was followed by correction and instruction. They were coached only with biomechanical advice. *This group got worse.*

******Another group* was told *nothing* after each race. This group *did not get better---nor did they get worse.*

******A third group* was told ONLY “*you’re doing well.*” No analysis. No coaching. They were the *only group that improved, and they improved a lot!*

This “you’re doing well” response to the last group emphasized “you,” “the self,” and paid no attention to biomechanical weaknesses. On the other hand, the “*doing well, but . . .*” group heard the positive reinforcement **and** the advice; but, even though the advice was without judgment, it did nothing to affirm the “self.” Those boys got worse! “But” became the most influential word, and this negativity was worse, even, than saying nothing.

This study says something about “over coaching” that can actually impede confidence. Reinforcement needs to address “how the athlete sees his place in the world, and how he sees his place inside himself.” Biomechanics are secondary.

A clear example would be Augustana’s Ted McMillan, the national champion high jumper who is only 5’10” but could clear a bar at 7’0”. A coach from another college pointed out to me that Ted planted his takeoff foot **toe-first** while all great high jumpers planted **heel-first**. My response was, “I know. Don’t tell him.”

I knew the biomechanics of the high jump, but I also knew that Ted's high school coach said Ted was the most intense competitor he had ever seen. That intensity increased in college, and his extraordinary talents were matched only by his confidence. He was a straight-A student in chemistry; he anchored the 4 x 400 relay to All-American status throughout his career, and besides a NCAA national title in the high jump, he was also a national champion in the 400 hurdles. He took on the five-event pentathlon one indoor season just for "kicks" (as he would say) and placed second in the NCAA national meet. And it is significant---I think---that while unequivocally confident, he was also without an iota of arrogance. He respectfully shook hands with every competitor in his event before competition started and after---win or lose---because **he knew his place in the world—specifically here---among other athletes**, and he knew that losing a race or a jumping competition did not mean losing his "self."

Another example is when our All-American 400 intermediate hurdler, David Volland, is in the finals at the Drake Relays. He is the only Division III runner in the fast heat, and he and two Division I hurdlers come to the last hurdle side-by-side. They've raced 370 meters, cleared 9 hurdles with one to go. This is by far the most taxing sprint in the sport of track and at this point they are all just about "out of juice." One hurdle to go, and I'm thinking no one---I don't care who they are---is going to beat David in those last 30 yards. But his toe clipped the last hurdle, and he finished third, only hundredths behind the other two. Without frustration or even regret, he said to his teammates, "I clipped that last hurdle." No one said, "way to go" for being first D-3 runner. No one offered sympathy like "sorry about number 10." I just said, "Anybody else would have fallen down." No one offered judgment, no pity, no race analysis. Just a confirmation of who he is.

I think this discussion of confidence at its most fundamental level comes down to a kind of demonstrative love. It's trust that he is loved for more than a win or a loss. It's trust that taking risks is OK. In David's case, he knew that by being faster at the 200 mark than ever before, he might pay for that aggressiveness in the closing meters. But David is more than first place, and actually being confident enough to take this risk is closer to who he is than any gold medal could illustrate.

In ***Their Eyes Were Watching God***, a famous African American novel written some 80 years ago, a woman who is a former slave *instructs her granddaughter, Janie---who is complaining about her arranged marriage---that she “oughta” love her husband. She “oughta” because he’s in the right social class. He can provide security, safety, and prestige, all because “he owns 60 acres, a house that’s paid for, and the [only piano] in town.”* The granddaughter wrestles with that “oughta” all her life until she realizes that safety, protection, and a respectable marriage are all grandma wants for her. For a woman who was a slave much of her life, safety is enough. That is her assigned place in the world, but Janie, revising that biblical axiom “we do not live by bread alone,” challenges grandma: “to you, only sow-belly and corn-bread are all that matter.” But “love ‘oughta’ matter,” she says, and with a deep understanding of who she is, she literally walks away from this defining marriage, confident that she is worthy of love. She does not measure her place in the world by security, prestige, or who her husband is. Similarly, the self-aware athlete who possesses confidence that is grounded in relationships and love, love that **he knows** he is worthy of---just as he is---does not let himself be defined by failure---or by achievement.

The effects of unconditional love, confidence, and self-knowledge are also clear in Alice Walker's ***The Color***

Purple, that famous novel that also became an Academy Award-winning movie and a hit Broadway production. In that story, all the characters live in sterile relationships that follow conventional rules such as women wear dresses and men don't change the baby's diapers. They all conform to these defining roles, and in doing so, they do not notice the carpentry skills of a woman, the joy a dad has in holding a baby, the husband who whistles while he washes dishes. Only the most unconventional character in the novel---the woman who wears pants instead of dresses . . . who loves God but doesn't attend church . . . who admires the stay-at-home dad. . .who rejects female and male roles in society. . . **only she(!)** sees beyond those long-held customs and **notices** nonjudgmental love, the joy in self awareness, and the delight in freedom. This woman notices what others do not, and she warns her most beloved friend: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." All those intangibles, then, are "the color purple."

I think she was talking, also, about those athletes who notice more than victories, championships, or records---all **measureable achievements** and **plainly visible**. The most confident athlete notices purple. Knowing that material success does not define him **is purple**. Accepting the freedom to fail is purple. Purple is acknowledging others' love for him as-he-is. Purple creates confidence, and it's all waaay more than cheerleading.

Let's go back to the race for the national title on that bitter, wind-swept day in November. I don't think that young runner knew the Wordsworth quote that reminded us that . . .

. . . **the strength of love . . .**
will make a thing endurable,
which else would upset the brain,
or break the heart.

. . . but he was secure and grounded in the “**strength of love**” which makes him confident---without reservation---that he “won’t be out there that long.”

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To James (Frank Horne)

*Do you remember how you won that last race?
 How you flung your body at the start
 How your spikes ripped the cinders
 In the stretch . . .
 How you catapulted through the tape
 Do you remember?
 Don't you think my sinews tightened
 at those first few strides . . .
 And as you flew into the stretch
 Was not my thrill of a thousand races in your blood?
 At your final drive through the finish line
 Did not my shout tell of the triumphant ecstasy
 Of victory?
 Live as I have taught you to run boy. . .
 It's a short dash.
 Dig your starting holes deep and firm.
 Lurch out of them into the straightaway
 With all the power that is in you.
 Look straight ahead to the finish line.
 Run straight
 Run high
 Run hard
 Save nothing
 And finish with an ecstatic burst
 That carries you
 Hurling through the tape
 To Victory.*

It's a celebration of life poem. This speaker is WITH that runner ----The poet LOVES that runner; it's palpable. His sinews tighten.