

Elementary track meet revisited

Written by Matt Franzen, Doane College head football coach
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The recent track season got me thinking about my early days and the only track meets I ever competed in. This got me reminiscing about an annual event that I deemed, at the time, to be very traumatic for me. Looking back, I believe this event may have helped to instill a healthy competitive nature and had much to do with who I am and what I do today.

Attending Gothenburg Public Schools as an elementary student in the late '70's, I was required (along with every other student) to participate in the annual elementary school track meet. One entire school day was set aside for this and each student had to enter into at least three events. To me, this was a huge day – it seemed that the entire community came out to watch (although it was probably only parents).

The problem for me was that I was not exactly fleet of foot. I would dread the day for weeks and always ask my mother to call me in sick on that day. Thankfully, she never succumbed to my pleading. She told me that I needed to go and do my best. The only saving grace was that we always got ice cream afterward.

The thing that made this so tough was that there were only three ribbons given out for each event. 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place was it. After that, well, better luck next year. I knew that the slipper kick was the only event I even had a remote chance to place in (and I did, once). The other events? Forget about it.

Enough rambling. What did I learn from all this? I learned that I hate to lose. I learned that even though the odds were stacked against me, I still had to show up and give my best. I learned that if I wanted to experience athletic success, maybe I'd better find another field of study (fortunately, tackle football came along for me in 7th grade). I also learned that not everyone gets the same reward at the end of the day.

Now, did these learning experiences hurt? Did these lessons burn me a little? Was going home without a ribbon painful for the young Franzen? Heck yes! Did it scar me? Did it destroy my confidence and ruin me forever after? Well, as I stated earlier, I don't know how else I would

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have learned some of these lessons so effectively and completely without it.

I realize that this is only one person's experience, but it concerns me when I hear about athletic competition for young kids where no score is kept or where every kid takes home a ribbon. I don't have kids of my own yet, but I know enough to know that parents hurt when their kids are disappointed. However, it teaches nothing and even handicaps the kids when parents will step forward and try to remove the challenge that can help to make them successful when they enter a society that is based on competition. It is very important to foster a young child's confidence when the opportunity arises, but real life contains plenty of set-backs, defeats, and frustrations and how these things are handled has everything to do with success in the real world.

And to my mom—thank you.