

Pride is Forever

*It's the eye of the tiger
It's the flame of the fight
Rising up to the challenge of our rivals
- Survivor, "Eye of the Tiger"*

As I sprint out from the starting line to warm-up, my muscles strain, my heart pounds, and my breath comes fast. I feel sick, but this isn't my first race, so I know that the nausea is typical. The chorus of "Eye of the Tiger" pounds through my head at a frantic pace. I reassure myself that I am prepared for this race. I have been preparing all day, all season, for this ultimate race – the 2007 cross-country league championships. I find I'm not comforted by my own reassurances.

I turn around slowly, panning my gaze over to the rest of my team, far off under some trees. The sea of red shirts and navy blue sweats is surprisingly heartening and I take a deep breath and look down at my own sweats and shirt. I turn around towards the starting line again. My teammates on the girls' frosh/soph team for Campolindo High School are shedding their sweats by my coach, Chuck. The adrenaline, which had slightly subsided while I breathed slowly out here alone, surges up again. Chuck looks up at me and I take one more deep breath before the sprint back. My feet fly encouragingly and I look down at my weightless, bright-pink racing flats, very lightly stained by the few previous races they have run with me.

I shed my sweats and t-shirt when I get back to the line, staring briefly at the white letters on my bright red shirt. "RUN." I plan to. I feel stronger in my "holy" uniform: navy blue singlet with a blood-red "C" on it and matching short shorts with a slit on each side. They aren't particularly comfortable and they aren't attractive at all, but they are for battle. We are forbidden to wear them except during races, covering them with the sweats and t-shirt the rest of the time.

I walk over to my team and let my gaze wander. I remember the previous day, jogging around the field at Campo and then sitting in a circle and talking about race plans and goals. Emily B. is supposed to be first, Nathalie must keep her in sight. Then comes me, with my goals of staying near Nathalie and running under 15 minutes. Ginny should follow, then Danielle or Emily Y. All the parts of our race plan sprint through my head.

My nerves stretch out the time and it seems like we've been standing here for hours. Chuck walks over to us and Matt, our assistant coach, stands in the background. "Take another couple

sprints.” Chuck says, seeing our nervous energy and patting various people on the back to try and relax them.

Half of us go out. I stay, saving our spot on the line. When they come back, I sprint out again, actually enjoying the release of tension. I stare back at the line of brightly colored uniforms. I focus on the maroon of Las Lomas and the purple of College Park. These are the two teams that are predicted to beat us, but we are determined to make sure that they don't. Echoes of yesterday's plans fill my head, “We're ranked number three, but we have such a strong team. We can do this! Just focus, and push, and pass those purple jerseys!”

I go back in as the man who will start the race announces they will begin shortly. Our team gets into a huddle, placing our hands on each other's backs and sharing the adrenaline. I find myself speaking quickly, taking the job of inspirer on the line. “Okay, girls.” I mutter, thinking quickly to figure out what is the most important, what we need to really remember. “We can do this. You know our plans. Get a good start, get out fast and quick on the grass. Then relax through the first mile and when you get to the mile mark, push it! We are so ready for this: we've been working for it all year. Take a risk, and let's do this thing!” We look at each other and all take deep breaths. Suddenly, the Las Lomas girls next to us burst into song and dance, breaking up our focused pep talk.

We all stare at them, not understanding what “riding that big fat chicken” has to do with cross-country or prepping for race time. The laughter that we share breaks up the intensity a little, but then we focus in again as they end. Nathalie puts her hand in the middle of our circle and we all look at it. We are less than half the size of the Las Lomas team, but our cheer will have more intensity than any song and dance routine. We all put our hands together and Nathalie counts out “One, two, three.” Our scream rips through the air. “COAST, ORB, STATE!”

We stand on the line and I pulse with nerves. I hate this part. The man with the gun goes on and on about what he will do, but I don't hear him. I am focused on the little start button on my watch, on breathing, and on knowing what I have to do to help our team win this race. Faster than I could ever have thought possible, the eternal words are being yelled. “On your marks, set ...” The blast of the gun sets my body in motion and I am sprinting out from the line, just as I have been doing to warm-up. Except now other girls doing the same thing surround me and the screams of spectators echo in my ears. I push through, keeping my eyes on my teammates in front of me.

Apparently my pep talk about a quick start worked, because even though I feel terrible, out of breath and weak as the adrenaline pulses through me and then drains out as I settle into pace, I feel victorious because Emily B, Nathalie, Ginny, Emily Y, and I are at the head of the race and the rest of our team isn't far behind. As I realize that Campolindo is setting the pace of the race, I gasp out to my teammates, "Settle in guys! Settle in!" My words to them are an echo of the words I chant in my head. My legs pound against the gravel that the grass has turned into and, faster than I could have imagined, I'm crossing the road to the real trail. The thought crosses my mind that the next time I run on this ground, it will be to finish the race.

Now I look up and focus in on Nathalie's jersey and the ribbon swinging in her hair. I don't have time to look at anyone else before the first hill starts its climb. People line the trail and I almost smile when I hear people yell for Campo. As usual, Chuck's voice somehow splits through all the screams and I hear him say, "Excellent start Campo! Get up there Crisp!" His words get me up the hill with ease and I fly down the hill after cresting. The noise fades quickly and I begin to watch the race. Nathalie is about twenty feet in front of me with Emily B. maybe fifty feet in front of her right behind two College Park girls. Many other girls fill up the gaps in between, but they don't matter. I stare up at my teammates, grit my teeth and ignore the stress that I'm beginning to feel.

Relax, I tell myself, *the race hasn't even begun yet*. I know, as does the rest of my team, that it's all about the second mile. Pace, pace, position, kick. For the first mile, we stay up there, but stay relaxed. We give 100 percent effort, but in the second mile, we will give 150. By this time we're up another hill and making a U-turn back towards the top of the first hill. I'm feeling good, so I start to close up the gap between Nathalie and me, making sure that the flatness of the course isn't lulling me into slowness. I look to my right for an instant and look down on the starting line. I taste the dust in my mouth and my legs are starting to burn in resentment, but I push ahead towards Nathalie as we approach the crowds again.

I finally get up next to Nathalie right before we get to the corner where Chuck is standing, right past the hill we just ran up. We have made a huge loop. I manage to choke out, "Let's do this," to Nathalie and I look ahead. I can't waste focus counting the girls between us and Emily, who is third, but I can see the basics. One Las Lomas girl and two College Park girls are ahead of Nathalie and me.

To score a cross-country meet, the points of each of the first five runners' positions are added and the team with the fewest points wins. For example, the first place runner gets one point for her team, the second receives two and so on. So, with the two College Park girls in front of us, nothing else matters. We have to stay ahead of their number three.

Nathalie and I are leading a pack of girls, setting the pace again, and we're nearing the one mile mark. My legs keep pounding and I suck in air quickly, keeping pace with Nathalie and staying in position. Then I hear a coach yell, "Get up there, catch those Campo girls!" I keep running, but I can hear another person's feet pounding right behind me, then right to my side. I want to push, want to stay ahead of this girl who is in all likelihood from College Park, but I repeat again, *Relax, you still have another mile to go. Don't burn out!* And then the girl comes up so I can see her in my peripheral vision. Our feet pound down on the mile mark, a short bridge, just as I realize that it is Danielle who we had expected to come in fifth or sixth for our team. I almost burst into a smile of victory, but the pain that is now licking from my legs to my lungs as they both burn keeps that from happening.

Now comes the part where we have to push it. It seems impossible, but so many things in running do before you do them. Although it seems my legs will simply refuse to go faster, they do, though they scream in protest. Nathalie, Danielle, and I run shoulder to shoulder across the flat surface and over a slight hill. The rhythm beats through us as only our pounding feet and hearts disturb the absolute quiet. Or at least, that's how it seems. Really, there are other girls around, but our worlds have narrowed to the little pack that we have formed. We push each other, setting each other's pace, and using each other to force our own bodies to keep up, to keep running.

We are approaching the only serious hill in the whole race and from the top it's all downhill. Still, we have to get up it first. And so we start up. My legs feel like they're on fire, and the air doesn't seem to have enough oxygen to keep me going. I gasp for breath and hear Nathalie and Danielle do the same. Memories of hill work-outs fill my head and I use them to propel myself forcibly up the hill. Pain must be disregarded, the top must be disregarded, everything must be focused on taking the next step. To distract myself, I remember our plan to do a "roll call" at the top of this hill. In a "roll call" we yell out the name of the person who is supposed to be behind us to remind her that we as a team are counting on her.

It seems impossible, with the dry burn in my lungs, to speak, but I do anyway. “At the top ... yell Ginny ... on three.” I’m not sure how much of it Nathalie and Danielle understand through my gasps, but I can’t worry about it as we near the top and my body protests more than ever. I count it out breathlessly, focusing now on reaching the top. “One.” My quads burn as if they’re on fire. “Two.” My mouth tastes disgusting, filled with dust and my hair sticks to my forehead with the sweat dripping down my face. “Three.” And then we are at the top, and all the hill work-outs come to use again as we all crest beautifully. We can’t slow down in relief that it’s over, or in exhaustion. We just keep pressing onwards toward that final half-mile as the sudden scream of “GINNY!” coming from three gasping mouths at once.

We wait, nervously for her response. There are four of us ahead of College Park’s number four, and Las Lomas is far behind in points, but our number five is the important one. If she is far behind, which she may be, we could easily lose. But Ginny’s yell of “EMILY!”, who is our number six runner, comes from just a scant twenty feet behind us. The victory couldn’t be sweeter and it’s all downhill from here.

Still, we can’t relax. The end of the race is the kick, the part where, against all logic, against everything your body is begging you to do, you must get faster. And as we approach the downhill that will take us back across the bridge that marked the first mile, Chuck is standing there yelling. “Let’s go girls! Finish it up! Come on Lambrecht! Let’s go Crisp! Come on Danielle!” He sounds excited as he urges us on to the final leg of the race and I’m ready for it. As we reach the downhill, I let my legs go, using gravity and taking quick steps to take full advantage of it. Our pack, that has kept shoulder to shoulder since the mile mark begins to fall apart, Danielle ahead, Nathalie back, and me right in the middle.

I run across the bridge and up a small incline after it and find myself crossing the street again. The race is ending, and a chant that I have been using all season begins in my head. *Pain is temporary. Deep breath. Pride is forever. Ignore the pain. Pain is temporary. Push it. Get faster! Pride is forever.*

I can see the finish line ahead of me. I imagine my parents and sister in the screaming crowds. I imagine my team counting on me to stay ahead of anyone who would dare try to pass me. I imagine the points and know I simply must stay ahead of the pounding feet behind me. I imagine that sub-15 time and I convince myself to forget about the increasing likelihood of

puking or collapsing after I cross the finish line. *PAIN IS TEMPORARY, PRIDE IS FOREVER!*
And I cross the line.

I, of course, didn't hear them announce my impending finish as I neared the end, but after I finish, I hear the announcer say, "And then there's Campo's number four and five. And that's it for Campo."

The victory, piled on top of my own victory as I see the big timer proclaiming 14 minutes, is too much and I shout out something that sounds faintly like "YES!" The various race officials, who are trying to take my tag and score the race, turn and stare at me. I'm coated in sweat, panting ferociously, feeling like I may faint or puke, but I'm triumphant. The chute loops back on itself and I pass Danielle. I raise my hand weakly and she raises hers to give me a sweaty, exhausted hi-five. She has the same glow of victory in her eyes that I do. I turn around to confirm my belief that Campo has just won the race, and there Nathalie and Ginny stand, weak and pale, but in the chute and elated with our success.

I get out of the chute and turn to Emily and Danielle who were ahead of me. We wait and congratulate each of our teammates and competitors as they leave the chute. There is an exultant, jubilant energy in all of us as we hug fiercely and sweatily. All our plans, our goals, our weeks and weeks of work, our blood, sweat, and tears have come to this moment, standing here, victorious.