

## The Gift

*“To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift.”* Those purple and gold words boldly printed across the back of my high school’s Cross Country team’s shirts are all I can picture in my head right now. Steve Prefontaine said that. What did he know? He was a winner; a record holder. People like him didn’t know about losing, or what it’s like to have the rest of your team watch as you cross the line last and well after they’ve all finished and watered down.

About a half of a mile ago I started the second cross country race of my high school running career. But this one was a little bit more important than just the second race of the year. It was my *first* race as a Varsity runner. My first race with the big dogs, and I’ve got a stinger within the first mile. Not a very auspicious start.

I suddenly find myself thinking back to those words on my shirt. *“...to sacrifice the gift.”* What gift? I’m slow. Why even try?

“Practice provides results,” I can hear Coach Bourne’s words echo inside my head, the only other sounds are my cleated track shoes striking the hard packed earth and my labored breathing. Results? Sure. I bust my ass, and sweat and bleed just to improve my time by a few seconds. But so does everyone else. So I’m right back where I started. Now, Prefontaine had a gift, but not I. I’m just a kid who thought I could be good at something.

*00:07:32. One mile down, two to go...*

*“To give anything less than your best...”* Back to this nonsense. My best? My best is, *at best*, mediocre. Who was I kidding? I miss Junior Varsity already. Vividly, I recall my conversation with Coach Bourne as I got on the bus earlier that afternoon, “Hoggard, Thomas is still out on misconduct, which makes you #5. You ready to run today?” “Yes Coach,” I quickly

reply, not wanting to upset the man with The List. But my nervousness gets the best of me, and I ask, “How fast do I need to run it in?” “Just go out there and don’t stop running, now get ready,” he answers sharply. Gee, thanks, coach. You’re my rock. This was Coach Bourne’s first year as the Cross Country coach. He coaches baseball in the spring, and for some reason, decided to fill his fall free time coaching distance runners. I’m not sure why though, because when he wasn’t telling us to be quiet, keep running, or, “Shut the hell up, Hoggard and listen to what I’m telling you to do,” he was talking about baseball.

*One point five miles down. We’re halfway there.*

Wait a second, I ran my cramp out and didn’t realize it. I actually feel pretty good. No one’s passing me up, and I can probably go faster. I might actually finish in decent scoring position. I smile wryly to myself as I start to weave through the bodies that stand between me and the finish line.

*“The gift...”* Here we go again. What is the gift? Is it God given talent? Because it sure looks like I missed out on that lottery. Or could it be something else? My breath quickens as I trip and almost lose my footing over a knotted tree root sticking up out of the hard packed red clay trail in the middle of the woods. Back on track. Where were we? Oh yes; the gift. What if it’s not skill, or ability? What if it’s something that can’t be measured by one of those big black clocks with the oversized fluorescent numbers set up at every mile point? Maybe everyone has a gift. I know I’ve got determination. And in a few hundred yards, I’ll have just one mile to go. Let’s see what my best really is.

*00:14:15. Just one mile left.*

I'm really moving now; we're out of the woods and coming up on the school. Just once around the campus and we finish on the track. My calves are tight and it's getting harder to lift my legs with every stride. My abdomen is sore and my chest hurts. But I made it this far.

I pick a rabbit out of the group of runners ahead of me. Now, I just need to catch him. Exhausted, I struggle to open up my stride, slowly gaining on the pack. Coming around the last turn before the track, I'm almost even with my rabbit. He catches on to my game and accelerates. I do my best to keep up. He and I break away from the pack and it's a mad dash to the finish. He is ahead by a few paces, and I start to wonder if I will be able to catch him. With the last of my strength, I break into an all out sprint. We're even now. I look over at him, and see on his face the look of misery and exhaustion. I know that look all too well. *This guy's gassed*, I think to myself. At the same time I see on the side of the track the girl's team and the 3 guys that finished only moments ahead of me. They're cheering for me.

I cross the line.

Mr. Rabbit crosses right after me.

I'd done it. I went out and ran hard from start to finish. Coach Bourne was waiting for me after I turned in my time to the judges. Too exhausted to lift my tired arms, he eagerly grabbed my hand and shook it as the rest of the team came up to greet me after my first varsity race. I might be mistaken, but the expression on his face looked a hell of a lot like pride.

*High fives and Huzzahs for everyone! 00:20:38 and 47<sup>th</sup> place.*

Well played, Mr. Prefontaine. I ran my heart out that day, and never had I felt so accomplished in my life. And while I don't know if it's the gift you were talking about, I figured something out, there on the side of that track, while waiting for the last of *my* varsity team's runners to finish the race: I didn't quit. To quit would've been to abandon my team, myself and

everything I worked so hard for. And I think that's the gift I will try my hardest to never sacrifice.