

## **Distance Running Failures** (published 10/29/20)

A few years ago, my daughter called in a panic to report that her parked car had been hit while she was at a friend's house. The details are a bit unclear, but it's likely that the car was parked haphazardly in the friend's driveway, and her mother didn't expect something blocking her path when she backed out of her garage late one night. The mother was apologetic, and quickly offered to pay for any body shop repairs.

But here's the deal. My daughter drove a 2001 Buick Century. It had a golf-ball sized hole in the floorboard near the gas pedal, hail damage from a decade earlier, and the speedometer and gas gauge hadn't worked in years. Before the accident, I could have sold the car for maybe \$500, and that amount didn't change after the accident. The Buick belonged in a junkyard, and \$2,000 of body work wasn't going to make it live one day longer.

Unfortunately, the Buick had been hit exactly at the door hinge of the driver's side door. With significant force (something my tiny daughter didn't have), I was able to open the car door about twelve inches, but then the door wouldn't close properly. That's how I ended up talking to Jim.

Jim was the retired owner of a body shop he had handed down to his son. He was about 70 years old but looked no older than 60, the product of an active life and an active retirement. He still worked about 20 hours per week in the body shop and, in fact, was covering the shop that Friday because his son had taken his employees on a weekend hunting trip.

I explained my situation. I needed the door to open and close, for the gap between the door and the chassis to be eliminated, and for the mangled fender to stop rubbing the front tire. I didn't care how it looked after he was finished as long as he accomplished those three goals.

Jim assaulted the Buick with a crow bar and a large hammer, and then pulled out a few dents with something called a slide hammer from the shop. In less than five minutes, the door opened and closed with normal effort, but the back end of the door higher than the front. He hung on the door and pulled it down three inches. The top of the door still had a two-inch gap to the frame. He sat in the driver's seat, put both feet in the middle of the door, and then pulled on the top of door to bend it inward. In less than ten minutes, and for \$60 in cash, the Buick was perfectly functional again.

That was my only experience with Jim, but I've met countless people like him. These are folks, young and old, who have learned or been taught skills that matter in the real world. Fixing cars. Solving problems with common sense. Building up people. Repairing relationships. Persevering not only when life gets hard, but especially when the obstacles get higher.

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Distance runners are a demanding group, with most of the demands and expectations placed squarely on themselves. In the weeks after State and Nike regionals, it's like that most high school distance runners are dissatisfied. They didn't run their best in their last race. They didn't PR or make varsity, or qualify for State, or medal at State, or win a team trophy. The risk to setting high goals is that you often don't reach them - or don't reach them as quickly as you expected.

Are you one of the disappointed? The failure? The underperformer?

Get over yourself.

You've already won, and you don't even know it.

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Let me start with a brief introduction. I've been a distance runner for 40 years, since I was an 80-pound 7<sup>th</sup> grader. I never qualified for State, and realistically was never close to doing so. With PRs of 4:53 and 10:46, I never considered running in college – but I also never stopped loving running. I organized a 5-mile road in my hometown during college, I still have my handwritten running logs from high school, and I've run nine marathons as an adult. With a doubt, the most consistent things of my adult life have been faith, family and my love for running.

I was slow in high school. I'm even slower now. It doesn't matter. Running changed my life, just as it has likely changed yours.

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In 2018, over 5500 Nebraska boys and girls competed in high school cross country. Approximately 875 (16%) competed at State and 120 (2%) earned individual medals.

Few things are quite the equalizer like distance running. Rich or poor, outgoing or shy, novice or experienced – none of that matters once you join the distance squad. Your status is measured in two key units: in seconds and how you support your teammates. While the fastest member of a team earns the most medals, he or she is rarely the heart of the team. The heart of the team is the runner who is the loudest or funniest, the hardest working, the most encouraging or perhaps the most caring. Those are the people that make you want to be at practice, and people like that are often the reason that distance runners continue to compete in college.