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21W.732 Narrative Essay

Injuries and Self Perception

No, this afternoon I won't be running with the cross-country team, I will be in the pool doing "aqua jogging" again, watching my senior year collegiate cross-country season slip away. Why? Because I am having pain in my shin, just like last year. Only last year it was much worse. The stress fracture I had my junior year was so bad that I had to walk with crutches and couldn't do any exercise other than swim laps. It was so bad that I was constantly grumpy and depressed and spent many nights crying myself to sleep. What made it worse was that I had worked and struggled the entire previous summer to be able to run again, and within a few months it was all taken away.

My problems began way back in high school. I was always a pretty physically fit kid; in middle school I won those presidential awards for fitness each year because I could do push-ups and make it through the mile run without walking. But somehow in high school I decided that I needed to get in shape. My friends weren't interested in playing with beanie babies or going for bike rides anymore; instead, they spent their time on the phone with their boyfriends. I found myself often sitting at home after school feeling lonely and questioning why my friends didn't like me. I needed to switch groups, come up with a new identity. Maybe I was a jock.

I tried out for the basketball team but didn't make the cut, so I started lifting after school. That was fun for a while, but the smell of high school football players that pervaded the weight room started to bother me. So one day instead of lifting I went for a run down the street outside of my school, out to the stop sign and back. The cool, fall air

felt refreshing, especially compared to the stench of those football boys. Within a few days I could run to the stop sign and back twice before I got tired. Then I started to venture out past the stop sign; it was exciting. Every day I would find new paths to run and would guess how many miles I had gone. Then I'd have my mom drive the route in her car and I would watch the odometer to tell how far it was. I loved to run, the feeling of soreness in my muscles after I came back from a run made me feel so alive and strong. I wasn't lonely anymore either, I would watch the cows munching on grass as I jogged by and would contemplate the meaning of life and how to solve my chemistry homework.

I also enjoyed watching the number on the scale fall. My friends used to give me a sense of security and acceptance, and now I got that from seeing the control I had over my weight. My body would listen to me; it was mine to mold. Things were good like this for a while, until I got so thin that running, the thing that brought me such pleasure and assurance, hurt so much that it made me feel sick. The cows weren't my companions anymore; instead they stared at me as I ran by, saying, "What are you doing to yourself?" with a tone of judgment and condemnation. I was lonely again, and I was beginning to get scared.

"Mom, I need your help," I said, tearfully, and then paused to regain control. "I need you to help me make sure that I am eating enough." She pulled me into an embrace and I threw aside any sense of control that I thought I had maintained. I let myself be surrounded by her embrace and another sense began to well up within me, one that I hadn't felt in a long time, love. The next morning and every morning after that my mom and I packed my lunch together before I went off to school.

My recovery wasn't immediate, but eventually I regained strength and running felt good again. One of my classmates suggested that I join the track team.

"Why?" I asked. I had kind of grown accustomed to running by myself.

"Because you'd be good at it," she said.

That was enticing. Instead of running to watch my weight drop I could run to watch my two-mile time drop. So I did it. I met the coach and started practicing with the track team. Track was pretty fun, I liked to run in the four by eight hundred meter relay; it was cool to feel like an important part of something. We each had to run two laps around the track, and the success of the team depended upon all four of us. But, what I really loved was cross-country. Running through the grass and cornfields was much better than running in circles around a track, and the cross-country team was a really close group. We decorated tee shirts together and dressed up for school on meet days. I decided to go to MIT for college and joined the MIT cross-country team. There were no cornfields or cows in Boston, but there were paths along the Charles River and fun teammates to share stories with.

Then, in the fall of my sophomore year at MIT I started to get in trouble again. I took too many classes and started to feel insecure. My weight started to drop again. It got worse and worse until the winter, until the day I sat in the waiting room outside of my doctor's office for another check-up. He had been monitoring me every two weeks for a few months now. I figured this would be a visit like every other visit; get on the scale, get scolded for another pound lost, and then go home. But this time it was different, I knew it when I walked into his office and saw the social worker that I had been seeing sitting in the chair next to his desk. "Uh-oh," I thought. "I'm in trouble now."

“You need to quit the cross-country team,” he said.

“WHAT!?” The tears began to flow. No, not that. Anything but that. Running was my outlet; it gave me my sense of self-worth and mental relief from the stresses of life.

“Just for a few weeks, until you start to gain some weight back.”

“Phew,” I thought. I just have to make it through two weeks and then the precious gift of running will be returned to me. Except, it didn’t work out like that. After two weeks without running, my weight was still going down. I started running again anyway. It was hell. My body was so thin and deprived of energy that running felt miserable. I dragged myself through workouts for a few days and then realized that my doctor was right. I needed to stop and take care of myself.

The spring of my sophomore year I took a lighter course load so that I could focus on my health and deal with this problem once and for all. I saw a social worker every week and went to my doctor for weight checkups. I gained some weight back and felt stronger and more at peace with myself. As the summer approached I was anxious to get back to running. It wasn’t until midway through the summer that my doctor cleared me to begin running a few miles a week. I carefully followed his instructions because I knew that in order to run cross-country again I had to keep my weight where he wanted it. When the news came that I was allowed to join the team I was ecstatic! My hard work had paid off. I was “healthy” again.

Running was difficult after six months off. I was determined, though. No amount of wheezing or soreness would deter me; I loved this sport. So, when the pain in my shin crept up I ignored it and kept running. But the pain persisted and got worse and worse until eventually I couldn’t ignore it anymore. None of the therapy was working; it started

to hurt so much I couldn't even walk. I rode my bike to Mount Auburn hospital and sat waiting in the nuclear medicine department while the radioactive isotope they had injected into my hand distributed itself throughout my body. When the young medical student began to scan my bones he said, "Whoa, are you a runner?" My heart sank. I knew what the little glowing spot on the screen meant, it meant that I had a stress fracture. I biked back to MIT, my hopes for the cross-country season completely demolished. I showed one of my teammates the film from the bone scan and her reaction made me cry. We both knew it was true, what I had worked so hard for was being taken away, and I couldn't understand why. My mileage hadn't been too high, my shoes weren't too worn, I hadn't increased my mileage too quickly. What went wrong?

I asked myself this over and over for the next three months while I traversed the sprawling MIT campus on crutches, and navigated the trip up to the fifth floor of a dorm with no elevators. At first I tried to stay positive, at least my arms were getting buff from using the crutches. But as time went on I began to feel like a worthless invalid. I watched my toned runner's legs dissolve into limp flesh and any sense of self esteem that I had built over the spring and summer dissolved with them.

Why was this happening to me now? Just after my summer of self-acceptance and healthy living and eating? My sports medicine doctors couldn't answer my questions, and they couldn't tell me when I would be back to running either. Would I ever run again? Maybe my body wasn't cut out to do this, I thought. Maybe I should just listen to what the universe is trying to tell me; I wasn't made to be a runner. I felt worthless.

Then, finally, after three months of depression and "crutching" myself all over campus, I was allowed to walk again. The day I returned my crutches to the sports

medicine office was one of the greatest days of my life. My recovery wasn't over, but it was a signal that restoration was on its way. Very appropriately, Thanksgiving was the first day that I ran again. I ran my favorite three-mile loop from my high school days, down into the valley, past the cornfields, and back up the big hill where the cows stood and smiled at me, towards home. My toned runner legs gradually returned. With it came my self-confidence, energy, and excitement for life. It was eerie, almost, the change in attitude and outlook that came with the ability to run. Was it the endorphins that running released? Was something else about the way I perceived myself changed by being fully mobile?

Now I guess I have a stress fracture again. After all that I've been through, here I am again, back on the sidelines watching my teammates compete while I record their splits. At least I don't have to use crutches this time. Am I getting what I deserve for my two bouts of anorexia? I don't want to believe that, but sometimes I start to. I don't want to be depressed and miserable like last year. I hope it will be different this time; I hope that I have learned that my value is not determined by my running performance, my academic performance, or my weight. These next two months will tell. But, after that, you'd better believe it; I will be back running along the Charles, contemplating life and how to do my homework.