

September 5, 2023 – Perspective

The fall was precipitous. Less than three months after standing in the front row of Hayward Field to watch our 4*800 team win a National Championship with a near American prep record time, we finished twelfth place at the Varsity level of our own home season-opening cross-country invitational, our team's worst finish in twenty years. The race was a disaster from within moments of the firing of the starter's pistol: Aden got spiked a few strides in (he is fine) and literally five of our guys went down in the first hundred meters, separated into two separate groups of tumblers. From there, panic set in, spreading rapidly through the ranks, as the crew desperately tried to make up lost ground rather than patiently and methodically working their way back up. It was a full-scale implosion.

"If the worst thing that happens to you is that you don't run well at a cross country meet, you've had a pretty damn good life." Those are words my dad used to share with me after my worst high school races, and advice I've relayed on to the many athletes I've had the privilege to coach. You take an appropriate but short amount of time to wallow in the misery of the poor performance, then put it behind you, replacing self-pity with resolve. You process and think about what you've learned from the experience. Sometimes these gut punches prove to be turning points. You search for perspective, and you look also for the positive.

One highlight was winning the open division on the strength of our freshmen group, all of whom we kept at that level so they could run the shorter course, part of a deliberate process to ease their transition to the rigors of high school Cross Country. Led by 2nd and 4th place finishes by Fawaz Anbari and Henry Miller, these youngsters showed both poise and promise.

Another highlight was interacting with alumni who came out to support us. One alum who stood out particularly given his height and distance-runners' bearing was recent college graduate Colin Yandel, there to support both his alma mater and his girlfriend, who was hired last season as the head girls' coach at Hersey. Colin was the breakout performer for our team in 2017, his senior year, where he finished 17th overall after being 65th as our teams' 11th best guy a year before. We'd never seen him run that well, and the improvement accelerated from there, resulting in him finishing 16th at state a few months later.

What I remember most about the 2017 Hornet-Red Devil invite, though, is what happened later that afternoon. About one mile north on County Line Road from KLM is Hinsdale Hospital, and that is where I headed with my wife Megan a few hours after the race, there to receive her first of two rounds of steroids, prescribed by her doctors after a recent ultrasound had shown abnormalities in the amniotic fluid levels surrounding the twin babies nestled in her womb. The steroids were there to fortify the lungs of 'baby A' and 'baby B' in the event of premature birth, which the doctors by that point had recognized as increasingly likely.

Three days later, on September 5th, I returned to school after Labor Day weekend. I taught as usual and then went to practice, and it was a recovery day so I ran the most common route in the HCXC playbook: 'Cass' – a six mile out and back which starts from the school, then parallels train tracks before the turnabout point at the route's namesake thoroughfare. I ran with Anshul Sankaran, a hard-working athlete who was one of those guys that never quite made it to the varsity top seven but certainly helped push those who did. I recall being more anxious than usual during that run, knowing Megan had an ultrasound appointment that was occurring concurrently. I took an unaccustomed detour after finishing the run down to the locker room rather than joining the team for stretching and strides so I could check my phone, and my heart raced when I saw I had a voicemail. "It's time."

About six weeks ago, we took Alexis to Shriner's Hospital in Oak Park in order for her to participate in a 'Gait Analysis,' a remarkable diagnostic test in which Doctors place sensors all over Alexis' body in order to map out her walking pattern. Alexis has Cerebral Palsy. The purpose of this Gait Analysis was to gather information that would better allow Alexis's Orthopedists and Physical Therapists to determine what assistance might best help improve her mobility.

I received the completed report a few days ago, and though some of the jargon remains inaccessible, I processed as much as I could. What struck me most was re-reading her medical history:

HISTORY: The patient was born at 26 weeks and 5 days gestation via emergency C-section due to low amniotic fluid and twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome. Her twin did not survive. She required a NICU stay of more than one hundred days. She had surgical correction of her patent ductus arteriosus (PDA) and pulmonary stenosis in 2018. She had delayed motor milestone acquisition and participated in Early Intervention services until the age of three. She began to walk with a walker at 18 months of age and was able to take a few independent steps at three years old. In the community, she uses a manual wheelchair for mobility, in school, she walks with a reverse walker, and at home, she can walk with balance and support from furniture and walls. She has bilateral solid ankle-foot orthoses (AFOs) with anterior panels, which have been customized for her using the AFO-tuning process. She is verbal and able to express her wants and needs in an age-appropriate fashion. She will begin kindergarten in the fall of 2023.

Alexis weighed 1 pound 6 ounces at birth. She had heart surgery at eight months of age. She had eye surgery in 2021 and tubes inserted into her ears a few months earlier than that. Her twin sister passed away at 13 months of age. She was in the hospital for the first 107 days of her life, then five other times by the age of three. She has Cerebral Palsy and often relies on her walker and wheelchair. She goes to outpatient physical therapy and occupational therapy every week, in addition to receiving services at school. She's already lived through a global pandemic.

Two weeks ago Alexis started full day kindergarten. Today, she turns six years old.

On this day that I get to celebrate her sixth birthday, I choose to exercise the privilege of writing about her story. We live in an achievement-oriented culture in which the message we often get is that one's self-worth is tied directly to what one has accomplished. Alexis reminds me how hollow that message is. She'll never win a high school cross country race. She is very aware of her disability and there are times when she gets very frustrated and upset that she cannot keep up with her classmates on the playground. Like anyone (like her Dad) she hates to lose, but she also knows when people let her win and knows it's inauthentic. Yet when I think back to all she has been through, I realize that her persistence, her stubbornness, her insistence that things be a certain way, these are major victories to celebrate. She is intelligent, funny, and braver than she realizes. Her life isn't easy and will present challenges unknown to most of her peers, and I fear more for the social barriers than the physical ones. But the beautiful thing is that as hard as it may be, it is her life and she'll chart her own path, whether I like it or not. The fact of her being is miraculous, her worth inherent. Ours too.