

“On Your Marks... Get Set... Cheese!”

The Nature of The Early Season Meet

On Saturday, March 18th, my team and I competed at our first outdoor track and field meet of the season: The Stony Brook Snowflake Classic. Although the meet may not have lived up to its name in the weather aspect, it was extremely characteristic of early-season meets. These first few meets of the outdoor season usually only have a few teams competing, take about a quarter of the amount of time that a more competitive meet takes, and are typically quiet enough to where the echo of the starting pistol never really goes away. Although the goal is always to win, the smaller field of competition in these earlier meets oftentimes makes winning an easier task.

On the surface, the laid-back nature of these preliminary competitions lacks the stressors and pressure of more high-caliber meets. Still, pressure-is-pressure-is-pressure, and if you aren't worrying about the competition between yourself and another person, you're worrying about the opposition within yourself. This opposition takes the form of breaking mental barriers and blocks so that you can push yourself to the furthest extent to achieve your best personal time. These types of races are arguably just as stressful as highly competitive ones because it is up to *you* and *you alone* to get to that time you want to hit.

I found myself in this exact situation yesterday at 12:15 pm. Our race was just about to start at 12:30 and after curiously googling my competitors' times (We all do it, no need to be ashamed!) I realized that although there would be some solid competitors to run against, there definitely won't be enough depth to where I can just turn my brain off and run with the person ahead of or beside me. I won't be able to just follow the lead of the runner ahead of me—

focusing on her hair to distract me from the pain and matching her stride hoping that she'll bring me in at a fast pace. In other words, I knew the race was gearing up to be pretty mentally taxing.

These mentally challenging races usually allow the negative thoughts to creep in, the "I can just stop right now"'s and the "I can't do it"'s. It's important to stop these thoughts before they even have a chance to manifest, which can be done by going into the race with a completely positive mood and mindset.

A Forced Smile is Still a Smile

By 12:25 pm, the officials had lined up all of the competitors in my race on the starting line. They usually do this a few minutes before the race starts to give us time to either 1. Tie our shoes again for the 10th time in 2 minutes 2. Convince ourselves that everything is going to be okay, or 3. Do some hops and skips that we think a) will warm us up to the fullest extent or b) make us look intimidating. Every countenance is the same: a stone-cold stare that looks menacing but is really just a product of fear; mouths in an O shape attempting slow, but shaky, breaths; and an overall air of concentration as the runner attempts to stay in control of our thoughts and feelings.

That's when something weird happened. Suddenly, the quiet atmosphere of the starting line was disrupted by the official proclaiming, "Okay, now everybody smile!". I instantly started laughing. Looking up to see him holding up his phone to take a picture of us was just so random and hilarious, not just to me but to everyone else next to me. A girl from Iona University looked at me and, between laughs, said, "Well, that was really awkward", which it was. However, I found myself grateful that it had occurred. Nervousness and anticipatory anxiety can weigh down a room, or a track, like a thousand-pound brick. When I looked around and saw my fellow

competitors smiling and laughing from this out-of-the-blue photo op, I no longer felt nervousness and anxiousness. Instead, the smile I now had on my face was accompanied by a feeling of warm joy and amusement, despite what was to follow.

On the Smile

I don't know about any of you, but growing up I was always told that "It takes more muscles to frown than to smile, so you might as well just smile!". Although I used to hate hearing that, they might have actually been onto something. The smile is an expression that has been studied countless times, both as a response to something and as something that evokes a response. An article posted on The University of Western Alabama website entitled "Psychology to Grin About: The Benefits Of Smiling and Laughter" describes the latter. This article finds that the simple act of [smiling, whether genuine or forced, positively impacts an individual's health](#). The article states that, firstly, when we smile, the body releases dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin. This release signals to our body that we are happy, even if we aren't *totally happy*, and will make us feel more joyful in return.

Are Smiles the Best Medicine for Race Day Woes?

In short, Yes. In her article for Fleet Feet, Ashley Arnold characterizes smiling as her ["secret race-day weapon"](#); which, I think, is a perfect way to describe it. Arnold communicates that, in her personal experience, smiling both before and during a race not only made the race less painful but also made her faster. The reason behind this, Arnold claims, is because when it comes down to it, race day is more of an emotional process than a thought process. It's true: when you're competing, you aren't in the state to think critically about what you're doing. Part of this is because it's unnecessary. Arnold states that racing occurs in our "unconscious mind" and is an execution of our "autopilot, I-got-this, muscle-memory" system.

You are doomed from the start if you go into a race feeling negative about it. Whenever I hear my teammates comment about how they aren't looking forward to a race or workout or how they will do horribly, I simply tell them there is no way they will do well if they tell themselves they won't. How can we expect our bodies to respond positively if our heads aren't in a positive place?

Nearing the Finish Line

After the starting gun went off, it was all a blur— it always is. The first lap went by quickly, both because we were laser focused and because we actually did go out too fast. My teammate and I, along with a runner from a different team, separated from the rest of the pack pretty quickly, and by the end of that first lap, it was a race between us three. The runner from the opposing school was quick and started to pull away from us during the second lap, however, I didn't let that make me nervous. Instead, I was calm and patient, knowing I only needed to put one foot in front of the other and focus on my race.

My teammate and I worked hard together throughout the rest of the race and ended up getting second and third. Obviously, first and second are ideal, however, I'm proud of the way I was able to stay relaxed throughout the race. I didn't freak out once (a rarity) and instead relied on my training and faith in myself to bring me to the finish line.

I suppose I'll never know if the effects of smiling were a placebo or not. What I do know, though, is that during the entirety of my 1500-meter race, I was calm, collected, and focused. Not only did the nervousness go away, but I forgot it even existed in the first place. Perhaps that speaks to how nonsense my fear of the pain and anticipation is.

This experience taught me that the smile becomes useful during those times when “Just

be positive!” is a lot easier said than done. If you ever go into a race feeling anxious or nervous, it wouldn’t hurt to try smiling. In the best-case scenario, the smile elevates your mood and transforms negative feelings into positive ones. Worst-case scenario, you may laugh at just how silly it feels to make yourself smile on command, which in turn could bring you some joy. Either way, you’ll have a smile on your face.