

The Unshakeable Force of Confidence

This weekend my teammates and I competed at Boston University's David Hemery Valentine Invitational. Featuring collegiate and professional track athletes, Valentine is one of the country's most competitive indoor track meets; its depth and caliber bring forth waves of nerves and pre-race anxiety in even the most experienced athletes. In the past, meets such as this would fill me with that same fear: anticipation for the pain that's about to deaden my legs and constrict my lungs, pointless feelings of inferiority to the competitors that line up beside me, and misdirected focus centered on my rapid heart rate rather than the race ahead of me. However, as I lined up to race this weekend, I felt something that I hadn't in a long time: a calmness overtaking my mind and body, accompanied by an unshakeable force of confidence in my abilities.

Much of the success I garnered in the early stages of my running career was due to my unwavering belief in myself, something I hadn't recognized until recently. It did not matter who I was lined up beside and how much faster or slower they were than me; my consistent faith in myself assured me that I had all of the tools and capabilities within myself to win. Fueled by the countless hours I had spent working at the track, and with the knowledge and passion that I wanted success so profoundly, my confidence and self-assuredness was unfaltering and pushed me to never give up.

This all changed when I entered college. As it was happening, I could feel my confidence draining out of me during my freshman year to the point that my persona was unrecognizable. I entered college in sub-par running shape, newly diagnosed with asthma, and anxious that I would be physically behind everyone else on the team. Riddled with health issues and sickness during most of my freshman year that affected my performance dramatically, my confidence had

depleted almost entirely, and it got to the point where I knew I had lost before the race had even begun.

The ebbs and flows of my confidence following freshman year were disorienting. After being sent home for COVID-19 that March, I trained as hard as I could for months until I finally felt like myself again. Through Summer and into the Fall of 2020, my belief in myself skyrocketed: although we couldn't race until Spring 2021, I was feeling consistently strong and persistent. As it would have it, I was knocked down many times that year. A seemingly never ending battle with COVID, a trip to the ICU, and increasing mental blocks all lowered my confidence so low that I started to question if it would ever get better —if *I* would ever get better — and what I would have to do to be as confident as I once was.

I found the answer within myself. I know now that I am not defined by my hardships, pain, or struggles, but by how I have responded to them. The ways that I have consistently picked myself up and pieced myself back together after sickness, injury, and times of mental turmoil, are all testaments to my strength and fortitude. Being able to repair myself repeatedly will always be the biggest boost of confidence for me, because I know that no matter what happens, I will always come back stronger.

Over the past year and a half, I have trained harder and more consistently than ever, adopting the "I Can Do Anything I Set My Mind To" attitude and not backing down. Although my physical perseverance and tenacity undoubtedly led to the exponential increase in my confidence over this time, I have found that it is more than just that. Realizing that every single person that I line up against is experiencing the same nerves, the same anticipation, and the same pain, as I am, has made the experience more comprehensible to me. Although commonsensical,

it's a difficult reality to come to terms with. We all have unique experiences in life, but at that moment on the starting line, we're all doing the same thing: race. Yes, it may be easier for some people than others, but the nerves and the pain stay consistent throughout every runner's racing experience. You can be the best runner on your team, in your state, or in your conference, but you will still feel the butterflies in your stomach on the line and the weight of your legs during the final fifty meters. Knowing that we're all about to go through the same emotions and experiences has allowed me to concentrate on myself, hone in on my abilities, and focus on what I love to do: compete.

The resurgence in my self-belief in running has allowed me to take the risks necessary for growth and success that I hadn't been able to in years. In recent races, I haven't been scared to cover or make moves, and I am confident enough to go out without fear of failure; I can't remember the last time I could say that. Going forward and into our championship season, it is more important now than ever to believe in myself and my capabilities whenever things get difficult. And, for the first time in what seems like forever, I know I can do it.