

“Breaking the Tape”

Every time I tell someone I am on Harvard's track and cross country teams I have a tiny feeling of unease. Yes, it's true I am at every practice, six days a week. But are you still a D-1 athlete if you've never competed in a single race? Every fall since I've been at Harvard I come back from a great summer of training, raring to have an awesome cross country season and contribute to the team. Yet each semester without fail something else happens. In the past three years I've injured my hip, my knee, my ankle, my hamstring, and most recently my foot. I'm essentially running out of body parts at this point. I was recruited to run at Harvard but here I am a junior, yet to race a step with the big H on my chest. I chose to give a Lowell speech today because I wanted to explain to all of you, and to myself, why I still run.

Believe it or not there is a huge community of people around the country who post on running forums like Letsrun, Coolrunning, and Dyestat and my early running career, my “madman” father, and my inevitable burn out were often controversial topics. The week I announced I was coming to Harvard someone made a congratulations post that turned negative quickly. Anonymous posters wrote comments like “She'll never run a step at Harvard,” “There's really no reason for her to be competing at this point,” and my personal favorite, “Hips and boobs she soon will grow / and then she will be really slow.” I grew up around youth running so this kind of backlash was nothing new. I started running when I was six and it's always been an integral part of my life and identity. In the beginning I saw my sister running and wanted to do the same like any younger sibling. I started running weekend 5ks and racing in the Junior Olympics around the country. People thought it was crazy that I ran a road race nearly every weekend. They figured my father must have pushed me to do it but that wasn't the case at all. I loved running road races because it was fun and there was absolutely no pressure. Who cares if I beat a 40-year old man or he beat me? Well, he probably cared a lot since I was only 4-and-a-half feet tall, and a girl, but to me it was just another workout.

My memories of my childhood are a little different than most. I remember a running club trying to ban my sister and me from a race by making the youngest age group 14-19 so we couldn't enter. I remember running the last half mile of a 3k with one shoe through the snow in Buffalo, NY because my shoe got sucked off in the mud. I remember my dad getting arrested because our running group had hopped a locked fence to run our weekly Wednesday night track workout. I know it's pretty atypical to run that much as a kid, but for my family and me it was normal. I was a runner—that's what I did.

In seventh grade I set the national high school record in the 5k indoors with a time of 16:43, or an average of 5:23 for three miles. That race has defined my running career in a lot of ways. It is my biggest accomplishment to date, but I was only 13 at the time. I later ran several PRs (personal records) in high school but nothing has quite matched that race in my mind. I came to Harvard with the expectation of being

competitive nationally but my laundry list of injuries has forced me to greatly alter my goals.

I know many of my teammates, past and present, have asked themselves the same question I've asked over and over again. Why do I still run? Sometimes I'm tempted to say I still run because I've done it since I was six, but ultimately I know you can't allow your past to dictate your future. Instead, you have to ask: what do I still love about it? I still love the competition and the constant challenge. I can't say I like the blisters much but nothing beats finishing a hard workout, knowing you are ready to do something big in your next race. I know what I'm capable of and how happy achieving that would make me, so that is what has kept me going. That is not to say it's been easy by any means. We accept injuries as an inherent part of being a runner, but when practice is reduced to seeing the trainer and cross training for days, weeks, and months on end, being a runner becomes an incredibly frustrating experience. The reasons you love the sport get lost and seem completely unattainable. The only time I've been healthy in college for a significant period of time was last spring when I ran on my own. I started in January at only 10 miles a week and was up to 70 miles by May. Over the summer in Barcelona I ran along the beach every day and competed in a 10k road race for fun. I finally felt like a real runner again—and I absolutely loved it. At the end of the summer there was no doubt in my mind what I wanted to do. I decided to go back to the team to fulfill my goal of racing for Harvard, a smaller goal than when I arrived, but a goal nonetheless.

My father ran a 13:58 5k just after college, his best time ever, and then quit competitive running shortly after. He knew he wasn't going to be an Olympian so he thought he might as well go out on top. He has told me on multiple occasions how much he regrets that decision. I don't want to make the same mistake. Even though I have gone through countless waves of optimism and disappointment over the past three years, running has made me the person I am today. I can say with confidence, even if I never break the tape for Harvard, my running career is far from over.