

Good evening, everyone! As Demond mentioned, the title of my speech is τετέλεσται, which is Ancient Greek for, “it is finished.” My speech is actually not about Greek, or about the Bible verse from Christ’s Passion that inspired its title. It’s about the line itself, “it is finished,” and how the concept of “finishing” applies to my own life — or doesn’t.

There I was.

Thirteen years old.

Feeling six foot five.

Looking out over a sea of reporters, spectators, and vanquished competitors.

A pause, an internal smile.

“A-P-P-A-R-A-T-C-H-I-K.”

I speak to you, of course, of the 2008 Georgia State Spelling Bee.

I was in eighth grade — my last hurrah; my final chance to go to the national bee in Washington.

Only the state champion would be going. No matter. I was confident, I was intimidating, and I had known every word asked in the bee so far. Ladies and gentlemen, I was the best speller in the state, bar none. And all I had to do, was not screw it up.

But, you know where this is going.

Three competitors remained, and I was at the mic.

“Entegument.”

“*Entegument?*”

“Entegument.”

Now, forgive me, but I had never heard the word “integument” before. Still, something seemed wrong. Whatever this mysterious word may be, my gut told me it *should* be spelled with an *i*.

But, just as I was about to, my own brain rebelled. It was against the first rule of spelling, I told myself, to self-correct an oddly-pronounced word. At this level, there should be no mistakes. In the end, I chose caution over daring, and began.

“E-N-T-E-G-U-M-E-N-T.”

Wrong. The reader *had* pronounced the word incorrectly.

I watched, through tears, as the final two spellers stumbled over about eight more words before a champion could be declared.

I had known all eight.

Now, I don’t mean to dwell on the spelling bee. I only mention it because it amounts to a near-perfect description of who Todd Jones is at certain critical moments. In sports, I suppose I’m the exact opposite of instinctual. In dating, or “not-dating”, as it applies to me, I second-guess myself. In academic bees — well, now you know. In sum, my psyche plays tricks on me when it’s time to make that final finish, to go from the proverbial third place to first.

I bet there are some of you who know *exactly* what this is like. For those of you who don’t, you’re lucky. You don’t *want* to be like me. You want to be like Charlie Anastasi. Is Charlie here? No? That’s too bad. In all the time that Charlie and I have known each other — which sadly remains at none — I’ve been very impressed with his mentality.

See, two weeks ago Charlie gave a great speech, in certain ways like my own, titled, “The Voice Inside My Head,” about his dedicated climb to the varsity basketball roster. The voice in *his* head, is helpful. When the going gets tough, *his* voice tells him, “last part, strongest part.” *My* voice, on the other hand, says “Last part? Woah, woah, woah,” and begins to fill my head with the most ridiculous thoughts — everything from propriety to form to the *implications* and *reactions* that would result from whatever success I’m about to let slip from my grasp. And, throughout high school, it happened every time.

Then came my football state championship game.
And for all you haters out there, yes, I played football.

It was a cold November night.
The crowd was loud, the lights were bright.
We were on the opposition’s 25 yard-line, with five minutes to play. It was third down and fifteen, absolutely essential that we score.

The play call came in — the wrong call. Due to a Divine accident, I was going to be the primary receiver on a complicated pass, and our coach was *not* okay with this. I jogged over and lined up out wide, rubbing my gloves together and calming my nerves. The coach, meanwhile, was having conniptions up in the press box, literally shouting at the top of his lungs, “Todd can’t make that catch!”

Just the sort of moment I would ordinarily be unable to handle.

But, you know where this is going.

I ran ten yards upfield, took one step inside, and then cut to the sideline. Our quarterback threw an absolutely perfect pass. I was running under it, arms outstretched, and do you know what was running through my head?

“I’m not going to catch this.”

I kid you not. My mind had reached the height of self-sabotage.

To my own surprise, the ball falls into my hands. I tuck it, turn upfield.

“I’m not going to break this tackle.”

I broke it.

I’m sprinting to the corner of the end zone, as another kid bears down on me. It’s Greg Jennings versus Darren Sharper. I see the light, and finally, *finally*, I offer myself a word of support:

“I might make it if I dive!”

I dove.

I scored.

We won by a touchdown.

While part of me would have liked to say that I finally rid my mind of its nonsense to score that touchdown, it really wouldn't be fitting. The beauty of the moment was not that I conquered myself to triumph, but that I triumphed *through* my own flaws. More than three years have gone by now, and I'm really no different than I was before. I don't look back on the catch with fondness as much as relief that I didn't mess it up. But, sometimes, I still like to close my eyes and replay that moment, to remember when I accomplished something huge, doubting even as I was doing.

In short, on one glorious November night, I surprised myself. Maybe that part of me will return someday. Or maybe it is finished.